MARCH 1997

interZone 117

£3.00



New stories from

Storm Constantine

Terry Dowling

Paul Di Filippo

David Hutchinson

William Spencer

plus an interview with

Diana Wynne Jones

and

Brian Stableford

on **James Blish**

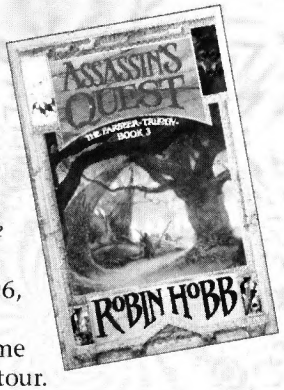
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This month's news

Voyager no limits

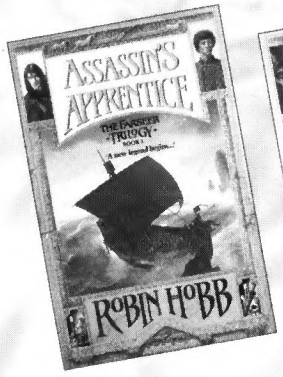
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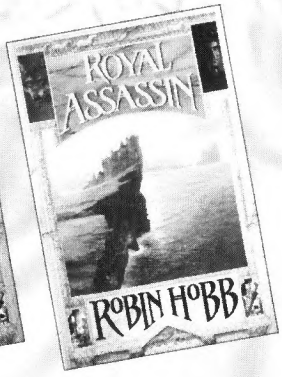


We are delighted to be welcoming Robin Hobb to England for the first time to celebrate the publication of *Assassin's Quest*, the final volume of the Farseer Trilogy. *Assassin's Apprentice* and *Royal Assassin* were the fantasy phenomenon of 1996, and there will be several opportunities for fans to come and meet Robin during her tour.

Dates set so far include Birmingham (Andromeda) on Saturday March 1st, Redhill and Woking (Hammicks) on Monday 3rd March and Cardiff (Dillons) on Wednesday 5th March.

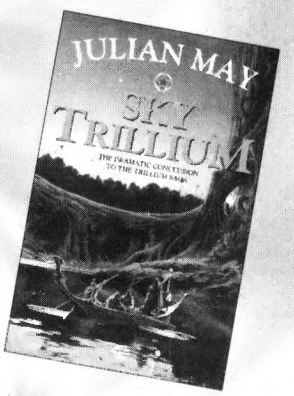
For further details, keep an eye out in your local bookshop.





Also out this month are 2 new X-Files novelisations, *Voltage* (3 February) and *E.B.E.* (3 March), in which the FBI's finest investigate freak electrical storms killing off residents in a small Oklahoma town and scour the country in search of Extraterrestrial Biological Entities. Voyager also brings you another top TV tie-in in the form of *The Unauthorized Trekkers Guide to the Next Generation and Deep Space Nine* — all you ever wanted or needed to know about boldly going where no man has gone before! (Available from 3 February, £5.99).
And for all lovers of magic and sorcery comes a stunning new collection of original stories from some of the finest fantasy writers of our time, *Sorceries*, edited by Katherine Kerr. *Sorceries* is available from 17 February, at £5.99.

SKY TRILLIUM
Julian May



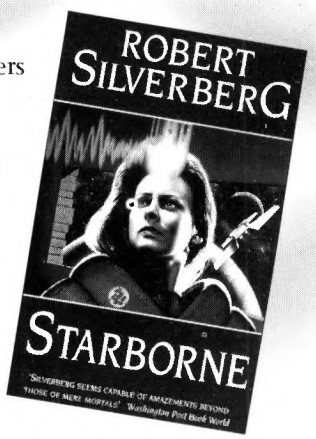
Sky Trillium is the dramatic conclusion to the Trillium saga and is a must for all lovers of quality fantasy. The three royal sisters are working in unison against the forces of evil, but after many long years,Orogastus, the banished dark sorcerer, is stirring. The stage is now set for a confrontation that will decide, once and for all, the fate of their world.

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ISAAC ASIMOV

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Available 17 February £5.99 paperback

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Lifetime subscriptions:
Lifetime subscriptions: £320 (UK); £380 (overseas); $600 (USA).

Back-issues
of *Interzone* are available at £3 each in the UK (£3.50 each overseas), postage included. (US dollar price: $6 Air Saver.) All issues are in print *except* numbers 1-2, 4-13, 15-18, 20-24. Order them from the address above.

Submissions:
stories, in the 2,000-6,000 word range, should be sent singly and each one must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope of adequate size. Persons overseas please send a disposable manuscript (marked as such) and two International Reply Coupons. *We are unable to reply to writers who do not send return postage.* No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused. Submissions should be sent to the Brighton address above.

Interzone 117
March 1997
science fiction & fantasy

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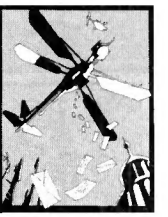
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Other Folks' Magazines and Journals

We don't run a "Magazines Received" listing (we tried it once, and it proved to be too much work) but we do publish occasional small-press reviews by Andy Cox and others. However, there are many other magazines and journals that we receive (thanks, everybody!), a number of which we enjoy or find particularly informative, and from time to time some are worth mentioning here:

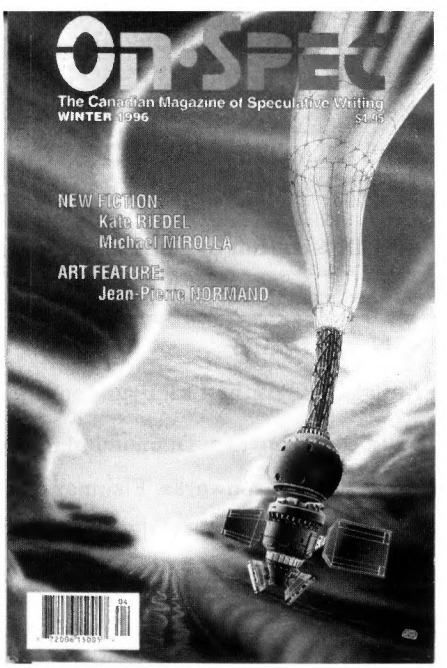
Aurealis: Australian Fantasy & Science Fiction. Latest issue seen: no. 17 (December 1996). Edited by Stephen Higgins and Dirk Strasser, this twice-yearly, small-format, 100-page 'zine is Australia's flagship sf publication (there's another one called *Eidolon*, but we rarely see that). Cleanly laid out, well illustrated (by Shaun Tan and others), it contains half a dozen stories, plus book reviews, market tips, gossip, etc. A must for all Antipodeans, including expatriates. *A$28 per annum (A$35 overseas) from Chimaera Publications, PO Box 2164, Mt Waverley, Victoria 3149, Australia.*

Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction. Latest issue seen: no. 68 (Autumn 1996). Edited by Edward James (now Professor of History at Reading University), *Foundation* is Britain's only academic journal on the subject. This is a special Mars issue, with good material by Stephen Baxter, K. V. Bailey and others. There's an interview with Mr Mars himself, Kim Stanley Robinson, and a second interview – a delightful surprise – with the 79-year-old BBC scriptwriter Charles Chilton, the man who wrote the *Journey Into Space* serials for the radio in the 1950s. If you're interested in the uses of Mars in sf, this issue touches most bases and is recommended. *£14 per annum ($27.50 to the USA; £10 or US$15 to students) from Foundation, c/o New Worlds Bookshop, 71-72 Charing Cross Rd., London WC2H 0AA, UK.*

The New York Review of Science Fiction. Latest issue seen: no. 100 (vol. 9, no. 4, December 1996). This one is a slim monthly, issued by David G. Hartwell and friends. It has been appearing like clockwork for most of the last decade and is to be congratulated on reaching its 100th issue. Here Samuel R. Delany waxes heavy, Brian Aldiss reminisces, and there are sundry other articles (notably from Gregory Benford), book reviews and letters. All intelligent material, but generally a lighter, quicker read than *Foundation* or *S-F Studies*. Try it! *$31 per annum ($44 overseas airmail) from Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570, USA.*

Science-Fiction Studies. Latest issue seen: no. 70 (vol. 23, part 3, November 1996). Maybe I'm getting old, but *S-F Studies* impresses me more and more for its academic rigour and for its dedication to the cause – particularly now that founding-editor Dale Mullen has rejoined the team after a few years away. Mullen was born in 1915, which means he is over 80 years of age, but no sharper mind has applied itself to sf scholarship in recent years. Who else, writing in 1996, could begin a piece: "Out walking one day in late 1927, I paused at a display window to look at the magazines that filled it and was entranced by the cover [for Edgar Rice Burroughs's "Master Mind of Mars" (*Amazing Stories Annual*)]"? Who else could combine such nostalgic reminiscence with clear-eyed political radicalism? (See his caustic remarks on a new but inadequate annotated edition of Wells's *The Time Machine*.) Other old-timers who have interesting pieces in this issue include Everett Bleiler, Sam Moskowitz and Jack Williamson; but there's also a fine essay by Brian Stableford on TV sf, an interview with Octavia Butler, and much else. Highly recommended. *$18 per annum ($25 overseas airmail) from SF-TH Inc., c/o Arthur B. Evans, East College, DePauw University, Greencastle, IN 46135, USA.*

Below: **On Spec: The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing**, for Winter 1996, a late addition to this listing. $19.95 Canadian per annum (US$25 overseas) to On Spec, PO Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6, Canada.

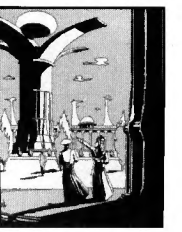


Tangent: SF & Fantasy Short Fiction Review Magazine. Latest issue seen: no. 16 (Fall 1996). Edited by David Truesdale, this is the only journal (apart from *Locus*) that reviews short stories from other magazines and anthologies. Each issue of almost every fiction mag is covered. With regard to *Interzone*, reviewers in this issue treat nos. 107-110. Alyx Dellamonica doesn't much like our issue 107, but Robert Waters, Craig Anderson and Mark Rich all have nice things to say about the other issues. Waters is particularly enthusiastic about the debut story of our new writer Dominic Green (*IZ* 108): "Occasionally, a story comes along to reaffirm my love of sf. Such as story [is] 'Moving Mysteriously'... I will stop just short of suggesting that [it] begins a new movement in the genre. It remains to be seen if Dominic Green pursues his ideas further... But new movements must start somewhere, and Green has provided a springboard on which to vault this genre into greater realms of wonder. Read this story. It matters." Phew! *$20 per annum ($24 overseas) from David A. Truesdale, 5779 Norfleet, Raytown, MO 64133, USA.*

Worlds of Fantasy & Horror. Latest issue seen: no. 4 (Winter 1996-97). Edited by Darrell Schweitzer, this used to be known as *Weird Tales* before the proprietors of that venerable title (originally a famous pulp magazine from 1923 to 1954) decided to sell it to a TV company, or something... The schedule has been irregular since the change of title, but seems to be picking up again. If your taste runs to "dark fantasy" this is definitely the magazine for you. This issue contains brilliant stuff by Thomas Ligotti and Tanith Lee, plus a story by Schweitzer himself, an Ian Watson story, a rare Lord Dunsany reprint, and more (some verse, criticism by S. T. Joshi, an interview with Peter Straub, etc). *$16 for four issues ($22 overseas) from Terminus Publishing Co. Inc., 123 Crooked Lane, King of Prussia, PA 19406-2570, USA.*

David Pringle

+ Interaction + Interaction +



The following comments are extracted from readers' letters received in response to our 1996 Interzone *popularity poll (covering issues 103-114). Final results of the poll will be announced in a couple of issues' time – Editor.*

Dear Editors:
Stories I particularly liked are "A Crab Must Try" by Barrington J. Bayley (#103), "Abdication Street" by Kim Newman & Eugene Byrne (#105), "The Spacetime Pit" by Stephen Baxter & Eric Brown – one of your best ever! – (#107), "The People of the Sea" by Keith Brooke (#107), "Under the Moons of Jizma" by Michael Andre-Driussi (#110) and "Doing the Circuit" by Alexander Jablokov (#112).

In response to your request for comments on the "guest-editor" issues, I would say that both of these [issues 94 and 114] were very successful. Both guest editors so far [Charles Platt and Nicholas Royle] have made shrewd choices of material which worked collectively as well as individually. They also seemed able to bring in stories that might not normally be available to *Interzone*. I think similar excursions into some other editor's mind every year or so would extend *IZ*'s scope without harming its identity.
Paul Western
Teddington, Middlesex

Dear Editors:
I particularly liked John Brunner's "The Drummer and the Skins," Darrell Schweitzer's "King Father Stone," James Lovegrove's "Giving and Taking," Terry Dowling's "The Ichneumon and the Dormeuse," Molly Brown's "Community Service," Ed Gorman's "Cages," Keith Brooke & Eric Brown's "Appassionata," Molly Brown's "Doing Things Differently," Nicholas Lezard's "Planet of Shit" and Jonathan Carroll's "Alone Alarm."
Mark Huenken
(address unknown)

Dear Editors:
I don't mind *Interzone* being guest-edited every once in a while. I thought Charles Platt's issue (#94) was better than Nicholas Royle's (#114), but that's because I'm more interested in what Platt is doing than Royle.
Martin Morse Wooster
Silver Spring, Maryland

Dear Editors:
I think *Interzone* is excellent and I cannot do without my monthly fix, so rest assured that I have every intention of renewing my sub at the earliest opportunity. My favourite stories of '96 are:
1. "The Conflagration of the Gryffe" (Sylvia Siddall, #113)
2. "Prospero One" (Stephen Baxter & Simon Bradshaw, #112)
3. "Sugar and Spice" (Keith Brooke & Eric Brown, #112)
Andrew Fielding
Keighley, West Yorkshire

Dear Editors:
I'm new to your magazine, having only just discovered you this past year. Now I see you want votes in a popularity poll. Here are mine. I liked most of the stories; however, there are a few I feel deserve special mention: "The Dying Fall" and "The Secret Autobiography," both by J. G. Ballard; "Lonniemania" by Don Webb; "Cages" by Ed Gorman; "A Bitter Shade of Blindsight" by John Meaney; "The Spacetime Pit" by Stephen Baxter & Eric Brown; "Community Service" and "Doing Things Differently," both by Molly Brown; "The Spear of the Sun" by David Langford; and "The Conflagration of the Gryffe" by Sylvia M. Siddall.

Good luck to you in keeping up the present standard. I never knew there were so many short-story writers out there! Why don't book publishers do more with the short form?
Nichola Quinn
London

Dear Editors:
Thanks for producing an interesting magazine. I find the reviews and general news most interesting, including the "Books Received." It helps me know what books to buy. I read most of the stories, but find few of them memorable. One that does stick in my mind is the one about crabs on the seashore... [Barrington Bayley's "A Crab Must Try" – Ed.]. Brian Stableford's stories are also very readable.
John Kleeman
London

Dear Editors:
Top of the form? Mary A. Turzillo's "Eat or Be Eaten" (*IZ* 104). That's entertainment. And once again SMS gets my vote for pictures (notably, cover #112 and vignettes all numbers). Bottom of the class? I was going to nominate the whole of #111; every story in that issue fell flat for me, without exception. But then #113 came along with Newman & Byrne's "Citizen Ed" and suddenly #111 didn't seem so bad after all... So my negative vote goes to that story, with a special mention of Newman & Byrne's earlier effort, "Abdication Street." Beyond smug.
Jamie Barras
London

Dear Editors:
My favourite story of the year was Ian Watson's "Such Dedication" (#103) – vintage Watson, it was sinister and contained interesting ideas. In Nick Royle's issue (#114) I liked "Alone Alarm" by Jonathan Carroll and "The East" by M. John Harrison, but I am afraid I have to say "sorry" about a couple of Royle's other inclusions – "Planet of Shit" by Nicholas Lezard (*not* because of the title) and "Zips" by Toby Litt.

One other regret: you seem to have rather lost Greg Egan in 1996. I am not sure Egan has quite found his feet with novels yet, and I miss his mix of philosophizing with hard-science ideas and excellent storytelling. Greg Egan, along with a welcome return to the fold by Ursula Le Guin, is why I am looking out for a copy of Gardner Dozois's last "Year's Best" anthology.
Stephen O'Kane
Hove, East Sussex

Editor: *Greg Egan, on fine form, is back next issue! And we may be running a further story by him in a few months' time.*

Dear Editors:
I enjoyed the magazine more or less throughout 1996. The Ballard issue (#106) I liked, but I haven't liked any of the "guest-editor" issues: you should continue to do them when you can, though. I think the magazine looks good (even though I don't care for most of the covers), especially compared to some of the much older issues I hauled out recently to look over. I always like the author interviews – regardless of what I think of their work. I approve of Brian Stableford's "Creators of SF" series, and usually any other articles he writes, which are always so bloody comprehensive and informative. I like the book reviews, but John Clute is sorely missed. Langford's "Ansible Link" is always enjoyable, also Lowe's "Mutant Popcorn." Can we have more TV reviews, please?
Esther Thomson
London

Editor: *I'm delighted to point out that our former TV reviewer, Wendy Bradley, is back after a very long break – and of course there's more than ever on the box for her to discuss, so we hope to be maintaining this feature. I am accused by another letter-writer (Barbara Lee of Bootle, Merseyside) of "sneering" at TV sf and its fans: maybe I have sounded that way, on occasions (*mea culpa!*), but I fully recognize that, for better or worse, TV is now the dominant story-telling medium – more important than the cinema, in fact. Lovers of the written word, or movie buffs, and I count myself as both, are bound to feel saddened by TV's ascendance over the other forms – even though most of us have been watching TV for decades! – but we must accept the facts of life: the various forms and media through which fiction has its being are ever-changing.*

THE RUST ISLANDS STORM

CONSTANTINE



I found it on my second dig, in the catacombs near Samedi Lake. It was the colour that caught my eye: a small green thing.

I lifted it from the rubble; a cylinder that left a verdigris powder on my gloves. For just a moment, I experienced a sense of déjà vu that vanished even before I could attempt to fix a memory on it. At first, I thought the little artefact was just another holovid chip: more dim, fragmented nostalgia that would depress rather than entertain; wrinkled memories of the past, when this world had been more than just a graveyard rubbish heap.

I tucked the cylinder into my belt-pouch and then forgot about it.

I was delving around on my own, beneath the harsh glare of porta-lites. There were no skull faces watching me, no bones in the darkness. We called that place the catacombs, but it had once been a city, now buried under mountains of refuse and hastily constructed buildings that had fallen during the last Great Ecological War. Abos scuttled on its surface like cockroaches. Anything of interest and value had been plundered centuries ago.

Recently, public interest had been rekindled in old Earth, and a team from the Historical Facility on the Organic had, after a struggle, secured funding to make a journey through space to come and sift over the remains. I was a member of that team. But what we'd found was just like the great pyramids of legend: empty plundered tombs. We could learn only from the shadows that civilization had left behind in the sand.

Around our camp, from horizon to horizon, stretched the rusting hulks of the long-dead city. We found the climate far too hot. Little grew on the rubble, although it was teeming with hundreds of tiny grey cats. The abos worshipped them and, for food, hunted goliath spiders, mice and rats. The natives looked like zombies – ash-covered and dead-eyed – and they had little interest in us. We had not been greeted as gods, which I think disappointed Elenov, our team leader, a little. When we told them we'd come from a country far up in the sky, they simply shrugged and said they thought many people lived that way. They could not understand our eagerness about the past and gave crazy answers to our questions. There was no curiosity in them, whatsoever. They seemed dull creatures – not at all how we'd expected – and it was hard for some of us to accept we shared a common heritage with these people.

Avoiding everyone, I went back to the compound at sunset and sneaked into my cabin. Our camp consisted of a row of rover trucks, which doubled as caravans – the liv-



Illustrations by Russell Morgan

ing space was incredibly cramped. We had a power generator and a canteen hut. The showers didn't always work and there were insects and monstrous arachnids forever scuttling round them.

We'd been working on the site for months and I'd started to get homesick for the Organic; it seemed so far away, it might not exist. I wanted to walk beneath the stars amid the lush fern-trees. I wanted to feel the universe spin around me. I didn't need dirty heat and the threat of disease. I'm an archaeologist, used to working on many different colonized worlds. Some I've seen were more hostile than old Earth, yet here the weight of history pressed down upon me. Would all our worlds eventually come to this? My only comfort was the knowledge that the retrieval bus was already on its way through sub-space to pick us up. Our sojourn was nearly over.

I needed a shower and, as I tossed my trousers onto the fold-out chair beneath the tiny window, the little cylinder fell out and rolled across the floor. I looked at it lying there in the red rays of the sinking sun. It seemed somehow significant. The moment was silence itself, but for the hum of the cooling unit and the faint call of one of my team-workers through the thick lens of my window.

I left the cylinder on the floor, while I indulged myself with a welcome cooling shower. Then, naked and wet, I sidled to my desk where my jacket was lying, and took my AI, Lucrezia, out of the deepest pocket. Once I'd set her on the table, she took form by steadying herself on limbs that spidered out from her belly, then flipping out her monitor and shaking it until it became firm.

I showed her the cylinder. "Can you read this?"

Delicately, she extended two arms that were feathered with dainty, clawed clamps, and took the cylinder from my hand. Inquisitive antennae snaked out and quivered over the object's surface. She pulled it towards her mandibles to taste its atomic structure.

"What is it?" I asked her, walking to the cooling unit behind the door to find myself a carton of guava juice.

Lucrezia hummed a little. It's a quirk she has, evidence of her personality. "It's a recording built into a playback system. Special recording, for direct neural experience. There are minute sockets set into either end."

"More yesteryear's pleasureware," I said, slamming the cool-unit's door. It had a tendency to swing open again.

"I don't believe so." Lucrezia gently turned the cylinder in her mandibles.

"Then what?"

Lucrezia extended an arm towards me. "That is for us to find out."

I sat on the chair by the desk, plonked the carton of

juice down next to Lucrezia, and took the cylinder from her. I turned it in my fingers. It looked corroded, dead. "Could it be an historical archive?" The possibility was exciting. So far, we'd found nothing that had really told us anything about the civilization that had once thrived in this place. The abos had scavenged everything, twisted it into something new, or else destroyed it.

Lucrezia hummed. "I estimate that is very likely."

"Then can we jack into it? It looks damaged."

"The outer casing is marred, but I estimate the chip itself is mostly intact."

I shrugged. "OK, let's see, shall we?" My heart had increased its pace. I don't know what I was expecting.

Lucrezia took a few moments to decide how best to extract the information in the chip. She scanned it with light, inserted probes into the minuscule sockets, laved it with a chemical bath. Then, satisfied, she extended an arm to the socket behind my ear and we conjoined.

Information hit me in a blizzard and I pulled away, yelping as we disengaged. "It's blistered! White noise!"

"The sensoria do seem to slip," Lucrezia agreed. "Some of them are corrupted."

"Try to find a clean section," I said.

"No, I think we should wait," Lucrezia said. "Allow me to work on it first."

I made a decision not to mention my find to anyone else on the team. Not yet. I had a feeling it would be taken from me, appropriated by Elenov, who was the senior historian. I wanted to keep this artefact to myself. Would it be like opening a tomb? I'd done plenty of that in my time and what I'd found inside them had only been rags of old lives. I could tell you what the owners of those bones had eaten for breakfast the day they died, but no way could I tell you what their long-shrivelled eyes had once seen, nor what they perceived once they'd translated those images into thought.

By midnight, Lucrezia told me she had the problem sorted out, although she seemed reluctant to proceed with our joint investigation. "I could process this information myself, then play it back to you. In my opinion, the data is unstable."

"So what's on it?"

"A personal recording, an electronic journal perhaps. A note-book... It's fragmented, and beyond my ability to repair completely. Allow me to extract the existing data."

I shook my head. "No, Luce. I know my hardware is less sturdy than yours, and my software more likely to crash – irreparably – but whoever made that recording is a kind of ancestor of mine. We need feedback, human feedback. I'm sure it will be of more value."

Lucrezia cannot sigh, but her retinue of hums are most eloquent. She hummed. "I trust I am absolved from blame should this experiment prove unwise?"

"Of course." I waved her caution away. "Let's jack in! Let's ride!"

The first seconds were fried. Gone. All I got was white noise and snow. My excitement plummeted. Maybe the whole chip was dead, despite the promising results of Lucrezia's initial tests. Maybe whatever was left could only be accessed by her. The boiling spectrum of random visual noise would give me a serious headache.

"It's no good, Luce," I said, readying myself for disengagement. Then, unexpectedly and abruptly, it all bloomed in my mind. Pixels converged into perspective, and a sense of remote time formed around my inner eye. A virtual world shivered into focus.

The data was empathic. Whoever had recorded it had wanted to share it utterly. This was more than a mere archive document, much more.

I sensed myself as female, slim, and in perfect health. I was striding along a swaying bridge, which was suspended from diamond fibre cables, between two bamboo cage towers. I glanced to the side, but the world below was wreathed in mist. Still, from the vague, shadowy shapes I could see, I estimated I was about a thousand metres up in the air.

I was aware of myself, but she too was aware of herself. We shared her body, or her non-local soul. It was difficult to determine, but the experience was at once euphoric and terrifying. She was aware of me, perhaps, only as a possible future audience. Disorientating. I could recall information about her, as if I'd known it a long time. She was 18 years old, with dark skin and a mass of braided hair. Her name was Shade. She wore a leather jacket, lacquer-dyed with multi-coloured spiral patterns. Beneath it she wore old trousers and a cotton T-shirt, their colours bleached and faded. A string of shells hung around her neck. As I became aware of this necklace, a memory formed: water-hiss, foam. The trinket had come from a souvenir booth by the beachwalk. Gradually, I became aware of the device that linked us. She was not using it as an implant via a neural socket, but it clung to the crevice behind her ear, extending a web of microscopic, bio-plastic filaments over her scalp. Somehow, these filaments interfaced with her mind. I was not familiar with this technology, but because I was able to use a more conventional method to extract this information, the device clearly had an array of methods to link with a human brain.

There was a strange clarity of sound around us; multi-coloured noise of natural acoustics, voices remixed by wind. The girl was walking, walking, salt wind grazing her skin as she talked aloud, recording.

"This account will be of my life and my work – my mother's work too, although she's dead now. There are enigmas about the past, and my mother's love of history and mystery have been passed on to me. I want answers. I want to know what happened here, why everything changed.

"The legends say that people came down from the sky, and sometimes I think they're just stories. Other times, I get a feeling that the truth has been wrapped up in myths, to hide it. Anyway, now I have this device, and it will help me. And I'm passing the information on to you, future-souls.

"Heat – she was my mother – said my father came from one of the rust islands out in the ocean. He was called Alchemist. I reckon I inherited all my tech-know from him. Long before I was born, Heat worked on trying to discover the truth about history, the history of this place, and the rust islands. I never knew my father, never saw him. Heat wouldn't tell me why they parted, or even whether he was dead or still alive.

"This device I'm using now was his. When he met my mother, it had been in his family a long time, a kind of relic. No one used it any more, although he would show it to my

mother and talk about what it could do, if only someone could work out its secrets. It's like a psychic probe, and it can look into minds, but the mind it reaches most efficiently is that of the land itself. It reads memories, picking up traces of information that float around; thoughts, residue of events. My mother tried to get it to work, but couldn't, so she just wore it around her neck on a thong, a keepsake of her love affair with Alchemist. It came to me when she died. And, you know, I think it was waiting for me. I didn't bother trying to fix it with any of the tools he left at my mother's house. Half of them are arcane to me – I don't know their function. Heat used some of them as ornaments.

"Anyway, I cleaned the device as best I could, bathed it in moonlit water, hung it out beneath the sun, buried it in quartz for 28 days. And it came alive for me. I put it behind my ear and it took a hold. With my thoughts, I ask it to record, and it does. It's the same for receiving data."

Shade's voice fell to silence, although I could still detect some sweet echo of her thoughts. Wistfulness, questions. She stood gripping the segmented bamboo rail of the bridge, and through her I could feel its warm smoothness. She peered down the estuary, towards the ocean, but it was hidden now by a low-skirt mist. She narrowed her eyes, looking for silhouettes in the fog. It was as if she was talking to me, yet at the same time, it was me who was talking.

"If you look really hard, you can still see the rust islands at night from here... I want to go out there, but whenever I make the preparations to hire a scudder, I just change my mind. Feel uneasy about it. Perhaps all that talk of ghosts when I was kid somehow stuck in my head." She laughed aloud, then sobered. "It's dangerous though, lots of ways to die out there: stray viruses, rusting hulks, blow holes, whirlpools, poisonous flotsam, you name it."

Grey out, shadow out, migraine fuzz. Pain!

I couldn't disengage fast enough. It was like an electric shock.

"Shut if off, Luce, shut it off!"

Ghosts of sea-air currents; my breath. For a moment, I was dreaming in between the two worlds; micro-circuits and myths. Deep disorientation.

Lucrezia checked my vital signs. I checked out normal. "Enough for one day?" suggested my AI with concern.

I slept for a few hours, hot and uncomfortable on my narrow bed, despite the air conditioning. Then, I stumbled out of the cabin into the blinding, white sunlight of morning.

My friend, Truce, was hunkered down in the grey dust next to the truck, sorting samples, his naked back plastered with unattractive UV filter. He turned round as I shambled towards him.

"Hi there, Serami!" He frowned. "What you been up to in there? You look ragged."

I decided not to tell him. "Was sleeping," I said, elaborating a yawn.

Truce stared a me for a moment, his nose wrinkled up. "Have you heard that Lena can't make contact with the retrieval bus?"

I shrugged. "No. What's the problem? Interference?"

"Maybe. She's been getting weird responses from the Facility too. Can't get direct access, but just receives recordings."

"There could be any reason for that," I said.

He nodded. "I know."

Our stares locked, though neither of us voiced our thoughts. We'd had problems getting the licence, never mind the funding, for this dig. The most paranoid of us thought there was a cover-up going on, that certain individuals high up in the Historical Facility didn't want to risk us upsetting any of their airtight little theories about the past. Before we'd left the Organic, Elenov had tried to requisition a craft of our own, but had been denied. We were out on our own, an unimaginably long way from the nearest inhabited world or station. Until the retrieval bus came, we were stranded. I didn't want to think about the implications of that just yet.

Truce made an effort to brighten up. "It's no problem. Lena will make contact with someone eventually." He jerked his head at the sky. "There are a lot of people out there."

I had visions of us being rescued by some rusting old merchant freighter, having to spend several lifetimes in cold storage to get back home. I smiled. "Yeah, course there are."

On the second day, as Lucrezia and I progressed with our study of Shade's recording, we discovered that the visuals or the sound would quite often muzz out completely, leaving a forlorn static that sounded like some long-distance alert beacon. By dusk, I was beginning to wonder whether the remainder of the chip was unreadable. Then Lucrezia found another clean space.

In the red evening light, I climbed the lookout tower on the left bank of the estuary and went to sprawl in the late light. Tilted on my foam-bed, I could look into the horizon where the sea skies swallowed another sunset, stubbing out the day. Sometimes, there's a mist out there and the island lights seem webbed and smeared, like a dream receding, losing clarity, becoming opaque.

I took Lucrezia from my pocket and we plugged into the next place in the old recording where the degeneration decreased.

Immediately, I was on-line.

I could see a city: ziggurats within transparent ziggurats, shattered in places to create yawning canyons. The elements had carved a chaotic expression from the city remains. Strange mosses grew on the metals. The landscape was a camera obscura of the sequined night-sky: blue-white and acid yellow glows of chemical light, and the shivering pulsations of firelight; illuminations that signalled human life.

I saw skeletal towers of bamboo and crystal fibre and massive domes that looked partly vegetable, partly manufactured. Ribbons of aerial walkways intersected high overhead, and below them lay a labyrinth of wider, silvery trails: canals. The city was beautiful in its chaos, but was this a culture emerging from destruction or sinking into it?

Shade climbed down from the walkway but, for a while, only static filled my head. I felt impatient, angry. *No, don't go!* Shade's senses had degenerated into noise, but for audio.

Then, a new voice filtered in: male. The words he spoke were disembodied and at first I could make no sense of them. I recognized, in Shade's mind, a frisson of interest. She desired this man, but she planned to hide the fact. He was the subject of study, and she must remain objective.

Abruptly, the visuals were restored, and I saw him through her eyes. Dark, thin, with penetrating black eyes. His hair hung to his waist, and his face was scored with ritual scars.

They were sitting on either side of a table, with rough cups set before them. The sweet taste of a fruity liquor was in Shade's mouth. From her mind, I picked up the man's name, which she was repeating silently like a mantra, throughout their conversation. Firetongue. He was renowned for his forthright speech; an Earthwalker, a member of a secretive clan who claimed to guard ancient knowledge. She was unsure how much he'd tell her, but was reassured by the fact he'd agreed to speak to her at all. Perhaps she fascinated him.

He took a sip of his liquor, gazing at her with amusement. "You must know, that among my clan only shamans may use the earth-ways," he said.

Shade knew she must be careful, delicate with her words. "This is not the earth-ways, Fire. I'm following my mother's tradition. She was a historian."

Firetongue wrinkled up his nose. "Yet you want to know what you think I know." He smiled. "Why does an historian want to learn the secret language of the earth?"

I could feel Shade's heart racing, yet her voice was serene. "Well, it's not exactly that. History leaves traces – all around us, and I use a special device to pick these traces up." She lifted her hair to show him where the device nestled around her ear.

"Sounds like stealing to me."

Shade shook her head. "Really, it's not. Let me explain about it. Whenever an event occurs, it leaves a kind of energy behind it; a memory, like a photograph. The device I use searches everywhere for transmissions, but it's easier to catch things at night, because then I can relax and concentrate." She leaned back and smiled. "I am the aqueduct that meanders from one mountain-top to another."

He grinned back at her. "It still sounds like stealing to me. An easy way to take the thoughts of the earth. You should work to earn that knowledge."

Shade lifted her hands to him. "OK, I know your people use psychotropics and starve their bodies and have weird spiritual experiences. But they're not historians. My method might seem too easy to you, but I want the information for a different reason."

"Which is?"

"I think we need to know the truth now. People conjecture about the past, and make up myths about it. Everything's got wrapped up in stories."

Firetongue laughed. "If your device is so powerful, what do you need me for?"

Shade shook her head. "Some things have been... I don't know... *protected*, perhaps. I think your people, the Earthwalkers, have retained a lost and forbidden knowledge."

"And you want me to share these secrets with you?"

She shrugged, wondering whether she'd spoken too plainly, perhaps offended him. "Not all your secrets, no. I respect your traditions. But all I need is one clue, just one, and then my device and I can work out the rest. I don't want to strip your gods of divinity, Fire. No matter what I discover, your beliefs are still valid." She felt, too late, her last remark was patronizing.

Firetongue studied her for a moment. "What *are* your thoughts on gods, then?" He seemed to be testing her. What were the answers he wanted to hear?

Shade cleared her throat, snatching time to compose her answer. "I'm not saying I think they were human, but..." She paused. "The legends speak of a primitive race who lived here, who had no knowledge of their own. Then the gods came from the sky, cast out by their own kind, and they owned forbidden knowledge. This, they passed to the people, who began to worship water, who built their temples and their cities around networks of canals, designed in specific patterns. It all *means* something, Fire. There's a secret in the patterns. Something..." She raised her shoulders in a shrug, daring to glance into his eyes. His expression was bland. She couldn't tell what he was thinking.

The intensity of her desire to learn his secrets, and the certainty that he *could* help her, flooded my awareness in a dull, unassuageable ache. I observed her feeling of need, that she must convince him to speak with her, trust her, and, finally, share his mind with her. It was all so real. I was *there*, with her, a discarnate entity within her brain, afraid she'd sense my presence, that I'd distract her. I wanted to advise her how to proceed, how to coax Firetongue to co-operate, sure that simply by thinking the words, she would hear them. *Ask to share his mysteries. Ask him to show you his way...*

Then Lucrezia buzzed in, to remind me this was just a recording and would I like her to stop the show for now?

I decided to give it a rest for the night. Lucrezia had bitched about me experiencing the recording twice in one day, and she was right to complain. Her welfare relied upon my well-being, and I couldn't blame her for her acts of self-preservation. Nobody wants a second-hand, empathic AI.

My body ached and tickled as it recovered from the sensory-noise effects. I found it hard to co-ordinate mind and body for a while. As I stood up, flashback images pulsed behind my eyes and I wondered whether I was steady enough to brave the ladder to the ground.

Lucrezia discreetly expanded flight vanes and noiselessly rose to a hover. She obviously did not trust my balance enough to snuggle back into my pocket.

I was OK until I reached the bottom when, suddenly, a city manifested around me. I saw steel and plastic cables, interwoven with vines and twisted tree-limbs; gantries of bamboo and wood; rope-nets and metal sheets; habitation platforms and a canal aqueduct that meandered overhead, from one mountain-top to another.

This must be a memory, I reasoned bravely, trying not to panic. I observed objectively as the images shivered slowly from a scattering of pre-thought into linear recall. Then it was gone, and the rubbish heap extended all around me, filled with the ghosts of a lost age. Only the estuary was beautiful with its firefly lights. I felt depressed again.

"Luce!" She alighted on my shoulder. "I got flashback then."

"Not unexpected."

Lucrezia buzzed around my head as I walked back to the settlement. "Tell me what you experienced this time," she said.

I related all that I could recall. "Our dead friend is poking around in the past, I think, like we are. But it was getting a bit creepy. I was assimilating too much, making it part of my reality. Not good."

"I did warn you."

"Yes, you did. But you know I'll have to go on."

"That too is expected. I must monitor you carefully for psychosis."

"Naturally. Luce, I think this is really big. I get the feeling, well, this girl's going to show us all we wanted to know coming here. We must make hard copy of this material as we go along."

Even though I was wary of what Shade might do to me, scared she'd make some kind of possession attempt, albeit unwittingly, I couldn't wait to get back at the recording and discover more. I knew that, before I progressed any further, I should tell Elenov about my research, but I was enjoying the privacy, and even after two meetings was becoming possessive enough about my ghost-girl not to want to share her. Elenov would probably decide that our resident psych, Bralle, should examine the chip. His training was more suitable for the task, and his personality profile adapted for it. I knew what I was doing was dangerous, but the danger had hooked me, and I could not surrender the thrill.

Also, Elenov had other problems to attend to. Lena had still not made contact with either the Organic or the retrieval bus. Much as no one wanted to admit it, it was looking increasingly as if we'd been abandoned. I was aware of the mounting hysteria in my colleagues, but since I'd discovered Shade, the need to return home was not quite so desperate. I felt I had work to do here, and the retrieval bus's arrival in two days' time might curtail that. By now, no one believed the bus would turn up at all. While everyone else began to panic, I remembered my talk with Truce. Someone would find us eventually.

The next time I accessed the chip, Lucrezia had to spin forward past a ravel of degraded data, more static, until we reached a section of pure thought and unblemished recording. I zapped on-line and...

...fell into a rainstorm of awareness. Energy sizzled through me, and cells of information whirled around me. I nearly disengaged. What had she done? What had she been doing while I wasn't there? I blinked, and it was a bizarre aural-visual experience, a slick sound that matched the sensation, a flickering of sight, retinas retaining the image of an inverted silhouette.

I heard and felt a subsonic rushing noise throughout my mind and body. I saw, with more than my eyes, wild, shivering patterns evolving in and out of chaos. Fractal growth.

My breathing was tidal, a soothing motion, with the backbeat of a rhythmic heart. I was no longer simply She/I, but She/*he*/I: a neurosomatic melding.

As my body shuddered into being in that world, I realized that she was making love with Firetongue. I could smell him, taste him, hear his grunting breath. His cheek was pressed to her cheek, and violating tendrils of her recording device had crept into his hair, his thoughts.

Now, cresting ecstasy, Shade travelled his mind and observed his memories. He did not know what she was doing. She had seduced him, clearly, and was now stealing his secrets.

This was not the kind of party I wanted to gatecrash unawares, but before I could disengage, I descended into pure experience.

Sparkling air; his nerve-endings, a blanket of sensual



motion. She drew in breath, clenched her muscles, experienced the sensation in his loins. The ignition swirled and clustered into a viscous electric charge that, via her spinal column, rushed smooth and snaky into her mind. Real-time vision roared on a monochrome flight path through our brain.

And there was the image of the aqueduct, revolving like a gargantuan DNA spiral.

"They *were* human!" The words formed in her mind in time to an orgasmic tremor.

I felt my body spasm. My eyes rolled backwards into their sockets.

Then, the recording ran into a cascade of disjointed image segments; landscapes, sounds, scents – split seconds of random, sweet, semi-corrupted fragments, shattering like a waterfall in her mind. If this was information exchange, we did not have sex as good nowadays.

When the recording degraded into white noise, I was almost hysterical. I needed to know more, experience more.

Obligingly, Lucrezia fast-forwarded and I got deep into the rush of noise and prickly touch. I knew I should disengage until we found a clean track again, but was too impatient. If the experience damaged me, I was beyond caring.

Then the world bloomed around my senses once more, and I exhaled deeply in relief. We were strolling along the beachwalk with Firetongue beside us. Foliage to either side of the creaking boards exuded a pungent, evening scent. The sky was scarlet and orange, fading to deepest purple up where the stars began.

Shade and I did not hold hands with our lover, although it seemed as if our bodies were touching. If he'd realized we'd eavesdropped on his thoughts, he held no grudge. We were easy with one another, walking through the fiery dusk.

We wandered out along the stubs of long-eroded sea cliffs, comfortable in silence. Firetongue lit a pipe and we shared a smoke as we walked. To the right, placid ocean reflected the lurid sky, while to the left, the land sloped gently downwards, jungled by city and biomass. We paused and looked down upon the silver arteries of the canals, the terraces of lock-gates.

"Tell me about the water," we said.

Firetongue leaned down and kissed our hair. "Do I need to tell you anything now?"

We could tell he believed our invasion of his mindsoul was based on purely carnal urges. "Yes. Tell me what you know." We reached for one of his long hands, squeezed his fingers.

"OK. Let's talk." His voice was amused, but now, because feeling had ignited within him, he was also curious about us.

We sat down upon the damp evening grass and watched the glint of the water below. "Fire, the myths tell us that, in the past, there was no fresh water here, but that cannot be true. Without water, there could not have been people. So there was water, and there were people, but they must have been... primitive, disorganized. The gods, whoever they were, came and built the canals, and from there on, civilization was born. But the strangers must have given far more than just the instructions on how to build an irrigation system. Even now, the waterways are regarded as mystical. Everybody knows there's some kind of secret attached to them, but no one questions it or speaks about it. It's like historical amnesia. We've forgotten something important about our own past."

Firetongue looked down at us indulgently, reached to stroke our hair. "Why is it so important to you, Shade? You're obsessed. Can't you just accept what is?"

We shook our head. "No. As a historian, I am fascinated by discrepancies. A long time ago, some great change happened here, a massive technological advance. Almost overnight, an extremely primitive culture acquired science and technology. The gods came. I have my theories about it. We have to know what really happened in order to know ourselves."

Firetongue sighed. "Have you ever considered that the gods might just be a representation of our own evolution? We learned how to advance because we discovered the spirit of the earth. The gods are the spirits of nature. From them, we can learn all we need to know, and if we listen properly, with open ears, we can hear the whisper of their wisdom."

We turned to look up at him. "No, Fire. People came here from... from somewhere else. People with more knowledge. From the sky. Isn't that what the myths tell us?" And in our mind, the furtive thought: *Isn't that what your memory tells us?*

He laughed. "You're crazy, romantic, a dreamer!"

We laughed too, to humour him. "Perhaps I am. But think about my idea. Isn't there anything in your clan tradition that might back up my theory?"

He exhaled slowly. "The rust islands," he said.

"Yes?"

"That was where the gods built their city. They abandoned it after so many years. They vanished. But they left the legacy of their knowledge behind."

We sighed, eyes closed. "Why did they leave?"

He touched our shoulder, the hollow of our spine, with his long fingers. "They told only the wisest of the ancient people. The knowledge was forbidden. I can't tell you more, Shade. These are secret memories. The shamans know them and relive them through the earth. Go out to the rust islands with your clever little device. Maybe the gods will speak to you there."

We leaned against him. "Thank you, Fire. Thank you."

Like the closing scene of a romantic film, the image faded out, gently, with beautiful flares of colour. The chip died on me.

The retrieval bus had not arrived. Neither had Lena been able to make contact with the facility on the Organic. Elenov had kept her cool and quoted the usual platitudes about interference, sun-spots and transatmospheric storms. Only the most stupid were mollified by that. I wasn't bothered about it. Something was taking form in my head, something so momentous, I dared not even believe it. Was Shade's discovery somehow linked with us? Like Firetongue's gods, we had come down from the sky and been stranded here. Were we re-living some ancient event? Perhaps that was why the authorities had been so touchy about granting us a licence for this expedition. There was a secret here.

When I looked around the shanty towns of the abos, I was filled with despair. There was nothing there to

remind me of the green, the people, the inland waterways thronged with coloured barges. I was suffering withdrawal, because Luce had hit a problem with the recording, and was taking her time smoothing it out. I knew she thought I needed a rest and was probably dragging her circuits on purpose. I pined for my Shade and her lover, who seemed to be my lover too. I wondered what conversations they were having, what Shade was thinking and whether she had learned the things she wanted to know. Had she visited the rust islands yet? I felt strongly that it was all continuing without me, and that rather than containing a fragment of Shade's world, the recording chip was a doorway, an interface, right into it.

Truce came up to me outside my cabin and complained I wasn't spending much time with the team nowadays. "You mustn't be depressed," he said. "We've got to live with this."

"With what?"

He shrugged. "Staying here. If we're stuck, we've got to think about making this place habitable."

I shook my head. "Someone will come. It's too far-fetched to think we're stranded here, attractive though the thought may be at times!"

"I thought you were pining for the Organic."

I glanced at him. "I don't know what I'm pining for, actually."

He laughed good-naturedly. "Come back to us, Serami. Stop wandering. Nobody knows where your head is nowadays."

I smiled in what I hoped was a convincing manner.

"You're missing so much," he told me. "We need to think about how we can sustain ourselves, perhaps indefinitely. Lem thinks that some of our bio-analysis equipment could be converted to help with agriculture and..."

"Woah! We're not supposed to give primitive cultures knowledge of our technology!"

"Neither are we supposed to get abandoned!" Truce rolled his eyes. "Think about it. These people are the descendants of our ancestors. They had it all once, anyway."

"Not exactly. Anyone with a gramme of sense, incentive and nous about them abandoned planet and ran for the colonies. What was left behind..." I gestured around me. "...was rubbish. It might be dangerous to give these people any of our knowledge." I don't know why I argued that way. Why should I care? I wanted warmth, comfort and good food, just like anyone else.

"We could do with your help," Truce said hopefully.

I sighed. "OK."

He brightened. "Good. Come along to the canteen with me and take a look at the plans Lem's created. Interesting design. We need an efficient water system, and the existing wells are certainly not that. Lem thinks they should be excavated, cleaned up. The town would be built around a canal system..."

"What?" Presentiment furred my skin. "He's made plans?"

"Well, yes... What's up?"

I grabbed his arm. "I want to see them. Now."

There it was. A beautiful hologram created by Lem's AI. He'd put a lot of imagination into the design, and a lot of wishful thinking. The rubbish tips were blanketed with green, with foliage and with crops. A mandala of canals circled and bisected the greenery. And there was the aqueduct, a graceful serpent linking the mountain-tops, carrying water down into Samedi Lake.

"I based it on my personal mandala," Lem said, waving at the image. "The one my analyst gave me back home." He laughed. "Now I'll turn it into a town. Pretty spiritual, huh?"

I nodded. "Yeah, great. How do you propose we build all this?"

"We've found a form of bamboo growing a few klicks north of here," Truce said. "Should be able to cultivate it, use it for building materials."

"Bamboo?"

"Yes. Are you OK, Serami?"

The bridges were strung from hill-top to hill-top, daring aerial walkways. Lem's hologram even had little people walking across their swaying expanses. If I looked close enough, would one of them be Shade? I felt dizzy; sick, but elated.

I fled back to Lucrezia. "Plug me in, Luce! I need to experience the last segments. Now!"

We must be on the brink of some great discovery that would blow our theories about the past into infinity. Lucrezia urged me to speak to Elenov about this, but I was still reluctant. One more time, I said, just one more time. I must communicate with her again. This time I intended to try and make her aware of my presence.

Shade had been in the rust islands for several days. Her skin was itching from the spores puffed from the lichens that grew on the rotting metal. She was surrounded by a surreal vista of what looked like skeletal scaffolding. There was little metal to be seen; everything was furred by the lichens – fire-red, luminous green, dull yellow.

She hadn't found anything. Others had been there, hundreds of years before, and picked the place clean. Every day, she came across timid mud-larks scavenging for any last morsels, who fled like ragged birds from the sight of her.

She looked at the strange ruins and wondered what kind of beings the gods had been. It was hard to imagine any human body feeling comfortable in these surroundings. Her device had been unable to pick up any information of use. She was squatting down on a wide deck that was filigreed with rot holes, staring out over the ocean. Was this the end of her quest? I sensed her despondency.

Don't give up, Shade.

It was then that she sensed me. Her spine stiffened. She became alert. Her hand fluttered to behind her ear. "I know you're there," she whispered. *"Speak to me!"*

Keep looking!

Lucrezia's voice intruded. "She can't hear you, Serami. It's something else she senses, perhaps something she wants to believe in."

All the time I'd spent with Shade, she'd used her device for recording. Now, she was receiving. She closed her eyes and the world went black for me too. But even as she received, the device recorded the information. I felt her mind straining to translate the faint, gritty images that flickered like grey static across her inner eye. It was like watching a badly tuned transmission. Earth memories.

She got to her feet, with her eyes still closed. Carefully,

using only a kind of sixth sense, she began to walk across the treacherous, fragile deck, letting the ancient messages guide her. For a moment, too brief, it all came back: images like old movie frames.

I could see now what the rust islands were: a hastily-constructed factory plant.

Then, through Shade, I saw the people. They were standing outside a facility of some kind, laughing together as if posing for a photograph. Their skins were brown, and their clothes, which looked vaguely like uniforms, were dusty and well-worn. Some wore necklaces and bangles fashioned from shells and driftwood. The gods.

One woman stood slightly apart from the rest, her hands deep in her trouser pockets. She had a strong face, with a wry, crooked smile. Her dark hair was cut square around her shoulders, although her thick fringe was pushed back with a bandanna. I recognized her, even though for a few moments I didn't realize exactly who she was. Then, a shock of adrenaline coursed through my muscles, made my legs twitch with a primitive urge to flee. I was looking at an image of myself, and there was Truce and Lena standing beside me, with other members of the team grouped behind; Elenov hunkered down in front of us, clearly in command. It seemed like a weird joke that had come back on me. I couldn't grasp the implications. The image of myself seemed to stare right into me, as if I were the camera's eye. Then, perspective shifted.

Now Shade looked back towards land, up the estuary. Her city did not exist yet. What lay there was a strange, colourless sprawl, but with localized areas of green. Building must have begun on the canals already.

"What happened to you?" Shade cried aloud. "What happened?" Her voice seemed to scare the ghosts away, for the images broke up into grey muzziness once more. She opened her eyes, gasping, and saw a flapping curtain of sea-birds lift off the estuary.

"Damn!" she said. "Damn!"

Shade, it's me! I'm here... She could not hear me.

She began to march back the way she'd come and in her anger was not quite so careful with her feet. Perhaps she really had invoked the gods. One moment, I was with her out in the sea air, the next there was a splintering, groaning sound and the visuals went haywire. I thought the chip had gone strange on me again, but then realized that Shade had fallen through the deck. My skin broke out in a cold sweat. Was she injured? Dead?

Shade! Get up!

I heard her groan, experienced her anxiety as she tested her limbs for breaks. Nothing more than a few scrapes. She had landed on something yielding. The walls of the place she'd dropped into were laced with corrosion; ragged holes let in the light. But in the dimness, she could see that something had been etched deeply into the disintegrating metal. It looked like some kind of ancient wall painting, a picture found in the recesses of a tomb. Shade stood up, went to examine it. She took out a small torch from her belt and ran its beam over the pocked lines. A message from the gods?

Here, where the aqueduct meanders from hill-top to hill-top, here where the cluttered shores of Samedi Lake hides in its valley. A cave. A tomb. Where treasures lie. The sky woman sits in the cave and holds before her a strange device; a weapon, a magic artefact, a talking mirror. Through Shade, I saw myself discover the cylinder at the dig. It was so clear now. Shade was the future, not the past.

I wanted to communicate with her so badly, sure that somehow, through some weird glitch of time, we had made brief contact. None of this was coincidence. We were mixed up in each other, close yet distant. I could not begin to understand why or how this had occurred. Maybe it was a phenomenon conjured by this ancient planet, where the weight of time hung heavily over the seas and mountains; where so much had happened, and the land remembered it all.

Shade examined the picture on the wall, a picture I myself at some future time must leave for her. Then, she was turning away, leaping up for the hole she had made in the ceiling of the chamber, pulling herself out, hurrying, almost frantically, back to where her scudder was moored.

She would go to the cave, for the secret waited for her there. It must still lie hidden, awaiting the light her entrance would thrust upon it. It had to be there. Some evidence of what had happened to us.

Ultimately, I could not speak to her with my living voice or my mind, but only with my memory. And yet she had seen me; the woman with the bandanna, smiling with her long-dead friends.

Long dead.

Night was grey and silver across the landscape. Outside my cabin, I heard the sound of merriment coming from the canteen. They were all so excited making their plans for a permanent settlement. A pioneer spirit had awoken within them. It seemed bizarre to me; only days ago everyone had been panicking about abandonment.

I stumbled away from the camp, heading out to Samedi Lake. Lucrezia came too, buzzing around me, but not communicating.

A group of abos were sitting around a fire on the diminished shores of the Lake. As I passed them, they looked up at me with curious eyes, as if I was some kind of apparition. Once they were behind me, I heard one of them begin to sing; a monotonous chant. The voice resonated in my head, made me feel dizzy and slightly nauseous. I felt as if I was having to push my body through the resistant air.

The entrance to the shaft had been covered with plasti-sheet and, as I approached, I was sure I heard it flapping in the lake breeze. But once I crested the slope of rubble that led down to the shaft I saw only a gaping black hole. The sheeting must have blown away. A long time ago.

The landscape was different. Nothing had been built here, but neither did it seem so desolate. To my left, the lake looked healthy and there were numerous little jetties along its shores, where boats were tethered in the darkness. I could hear the sound of wood rubbing on wood, the plashing of wavelets against their hulls. Then, a spectral image of how the lake appeared in my time superimposed itself over the landscape, only to surrender seconds later to the scene of Shade's time. I guessed that if I looked behind me I would not see the lights of our camp; when I did glance over my shoulder, there was only a grey murkiness like a veil.

This was neither my time nor Shade's, but a strange interface of both. I accepted it fully, as if this was some-

thing that happened to me every day. It didn't feel strange, but somehow familiar. What or whose memories was I tapping into though? Landscape dreams?

I went towards the shaft entrance, my heart beating fast. Just as I was about to enter the darkness, someone came out of it in a hurry. We both yelped and jumped back. I looked into a startled face, lit by a greenish light from a lumi-cell.

"Shade!" I said. She would vanish. I was sure she would vanish. Or maybe I would. Was I the ghost or she?

Shade stared at me in what could have been horror or simple disbelief. "You," she whispered, and then glanced around herself quickly. I could tell she was shocked, slightly afraid, and wondering whether to run for it.

To reassure her, I reached out and took hold of her hands that were both gripping the lumi-cell. "It's OK. I'm here. I'm really here."

She did not flinch away from me. She was warm, alive. If I leaned closer, I knew I'd be able to smell her. Her startled expression was comical. I had to laugh. "This is incredible. I feel I know you... The rust islands... the device... Listen to me, Shade. You were right: there were no gods, only stranded people, castaways."

She narrowed her eyes. "Have *I* made you appear here now?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Time is looping around us. We're connected somehow; perhaps like calls to like, even across time."

Shade managed a smile. "I've felt your presence," she murmured. "I thought it was my imagination, creating an audience for what I was doing." She reached up behind her ear. "It must be the device... some weird function everyone had forgotten..."

Suddenly, I was afraid she was going to remove the device and show it to me. My stomach churned, and a white-hot pain shot behind my eyes. I turned away from her. "No, don't remove it, Shade. It already exists in this time... if this *is* my time. And I think you wearing it is one of the things that's making this possible, if not the *only* thing."

"OK." I turned back to her. She was frowning. "This is the past... isn't it?"

I shook my head. "Not exactly. I think we're outside of both times, or somehow hovering between the two. All I know is that I found your recording in this place a while back and I've been interacting with it. You thought you were talking to the future, Shade, but you weren't."

"So, I was talking to the gods themselves!" She walked past me, and her image seemed to shiver before me. I reached out and held on to her, although she ignored my presumptuous move. "It's so different," she said, in wonder, indicating the shifting landscape. Perhaps she saw more of my time than I did. "So desolate... empty." She glanced at me. "You made this place live?"

"Not yet, but I think we will."

"But how did the device get here? Can I get back?"

I looked behind us, at the entrance to the shaft. Weeds grew around it and some were in flower. I nodded. "I think you can."

She rubbed her face. "I have to ask you things. Quickly. What happened? Where did you go?"

I laughed. "I don't know. We haven't gone yet, have we!" I told her about the team, how we were stranded and then how I'd found the cylinder and all that had



happened since. She was interested in Lem's plans; his realization of his personal mandala.

"Is that the only the only thing that makes the canals sacred? An engineer's private joke?" She shook her head in bewilderment.

"Perhaps legends will grow up around it. I think, because of what Firetongue told you, that we must leave here eventually. Us, or our descendants. Some freighter will find us, or perhaps things will change on the Organic."

Shade hunkered down beside me in the rubble, picked up a handful of ashy earth and let it sift through her fingers. Then she let her hands dangle between her knees, staring out over the lake. "Why did they abandon you here? Was it because your people destroyed this world, used it up? What is it they don't want you to find?"

I sighed. "I don't know. Whatever it is, I think it's long gone; buried, corroded or stolen. Perhaps we'll never know."

Shade shook her head. "I can't believe I've been given this." She squinted up at me. "Hey, what's your name?"

"Serami."

"Serami the goddess." She grinned. "Perhaps I should start a cult!" Then she frowned. "But how will my recording get back to you. It doesn't make sense."

"Leave it here," I said.

She raised an eyebrow at me. "But you've already discovered it in this time."

I raised my hands. "So. We don't know what's going on, other than that time is weird. It's the only thing you can do. Don't show the recording device to me. Just leave it back in there somewhere." I flapped my hand at the dark entrance to the shaft.

"In the old shrine?"

"Is that what it is?"

She nodded. "I suppose I could... bury it or something." She did not sound convinced.

"Just do it, Shade." I was finding it hard to keep her image before me now. It was as if I was only wishing her to be there, visualizing her. "Do it now! Go!"

She stood up, reached out to me with one hand, but I felt only a shiver against my skin. Whatever fracture of time had allowed our meeting was closing up; I could sense it. Perhaps she could too. With one final glance behind her, and a grim smile, she walked back into the entrance of the shaft.

I filled up with emotion that spilled out of my eyes. It was over now. I knew we would not meet again. I sensed grief within me, but also a kind of awakening, as if I'd found something I could never lose.

It was only when I heard Lucrezia's soft buzzing whine at my shoulder that I realized I had put my hands over my face.

"Serami?" Lucrezia hovered in front of my face.

"She was here," I said. "Shade. We talked."

Lucrezia was silent for a moment, a most human reaction I thought, but she was probably just scanning the surroundings for some kind of evidence. "That is impossible," she said at last.

I shook my head. "No. I'm not crazy, Luce. I know what I saw and heard." Around me, the lake was as it always was; a vast shallow puddle, devoid of life. Only irrigation would change that. It hadn't happened yet.

"Time to go," Lucrezia said sternly. "I think you've experimented enough."

We went back to my cabin, because I didn't want to face anybody yet. Already the experience at the lake was contracting in my memory. I knew that, eventually, it would seem like nothing more than a dream.

Lucrezia would not accept I'd witnessed a real event. She told me it was impossible because she had been with me the whole time, that I'd simply stopped walking, let out a yelp and put my head in my hands. She'd seen and sensed nothing. Had I been hallucinating? Now, I couldn't be sure.

The following day I went out to the lake again, and after hesitating at the entrance to the shaft for a while, I went inside. What I expected to find was some evidence of Shade's visit, but of course there was none. The cylinder was in my pocket, and there was no eerie duplicate lying where I'd first found it.

Lucrezia has theories for what happened – some kind of hallucinatory displacement, brought on my interface with the recording. After analysing the situation, she suggested that the information we'd received from the cylinder had somehow been created as we'd accessed it, that the device might have been something other than a journal chip; perhaps some sort of leisure VR device that stimulated the imagination.

I didn't want to believe that and thought we should attempt to recreate the whole experience. Maybe I could even meet Shade again that way. But when we tried to access the data once more, we discovered that it had degenerated completely. Lucrezia said that the corrosion must have accelerated, damaging the cylinder irreparably.

Still, I sit every evening beside the estuary and gaze out to the place where the rust islands will be. Boats bob upon the placid waters; firefly fishermen trawl for shining treasures. I know that in some future time, Shade's life continues, only now the memory of her meeting with me is lodged firmly in her mind. I speak aloud to her sometimes, wondering whether some dream-shred of my consciousness can somehow leak through my time into hers. This old world: it stirs in its sleep and dreams. We are simply part of the dreaming, I think.

The sky is infinite above me, and I think about how the universe buzzes with unseen life. Here I am: so small upon this spinning ball. How young we are. How little we know.

Storm Constantine is the author of Stalking Tender Prey (1995), Scenting Hallowed Blood (1996) and many other novels. Her previous stories in Interzone were "Priest of Hands" (issue 58), "Built on Blood" (issue 64) and "The Green Calling" (issue 73). Born in 1956, she lives in Stafford.

Alice, Alfie, Ted and the Aliens

Paul Di Filippo

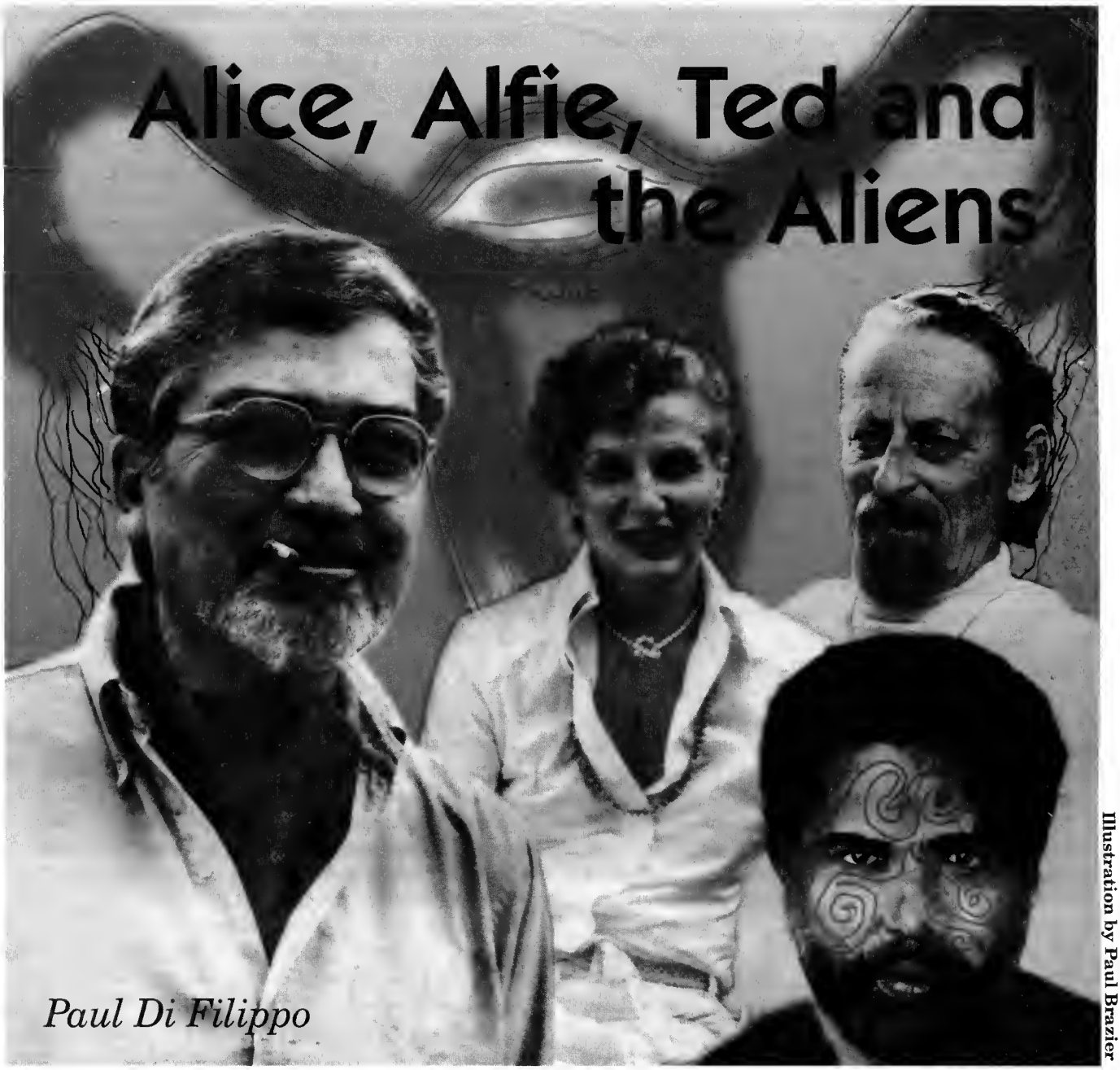


Illustration by Paul Brazier

1 The Woman Who Was Plugged Up

She sits half a mile underground beneath McLean, Virginia, in the dark, alone in the spacious auditorium.

Then the projector comes on, casting its flare of acid brilliance on the wall-mounted screen, and the dead (?) man's black-and-white film begins to roll. From the projection booth, celluloid rattles on sprockets like autumn leaves in a graveyard wind.

The photography is amateurish, befitting the film's source: a cheap Bell and Howell Super 8 in the hands of a vacationer. It reminds her inevitably of the Zapruder sequence, so familiar after this past mad year, thanks to the frame-by-frame exegesis delivered and redelivered by endless TV commentators. Flipbook images of Nixon dying in Pat's arms, blood soaking the First Lady's famous cloth coat from his chest shredded by the dozen bullets pumped out by that fanatical Puerto Rican nationalist, Anaya. What a stupid, *apropos* name, she thinks. Sounds like annihilate or annoying. Not in the assassin's language, of course. Idiot coincidence, mocking them all.

And the biggest mockery perpetrated by that earnestly misguided killer idealist, thinks the woman, *was elevating the Vice President, that ignorant hillbilly ex-truck-driver, as my boss.*

The screen before her now displays images of its own, and the seated woman forces herself to concentrate on them, bringing her keen intellect to bear, trying to gaze with fresh eyes and unbiased mind, despite having watched this silent film so often before.

Time to earn your pay, Alice, she chides herself. *Time to put all those fancy degrees and decades of experience at unriddling the inexplicable to work.*

Time to save the world.

(Although all she wants – all she has ever really wanted – to do is to be able to find the courage to leave it.)

She folds her hands awkwardly in her lap, and the habitual gesture brings a torrent of pictures and sensations: hot African sunlight, scratchy blanket under her bare buttocks, smells of dust and cattle and the acrid smoke of dung cooking fires, the sharkbite of steel where it was never meant to bite, a little girl's screams,

blood on a dull knife.

The movie, she counsels herself. *Watch the movie.*

It's a shot of the Lincoln Memorial up on the wall. Lots of tourists in their Bermuda shorts and Hawaiian shirts, garish even in black and white, vendors of hot dogs and balloons, Park Service guards in their Smoky the Bear hats. But their backs are all turned toward the expected focus, the statue of the Great Emancipator. Instead the crowd is raptly concentrating on something else entirely.

Something unplanned, unprecedented, unprepared for.

One of the Svabhavikakaya has come among them.

And damn those aliens for having gotten themselves christened with such an unwieldy name, by landing first in Dharmsala last year!

She speculates that this one must have come from the huge uterine ship parked in front of the White House, knowing all the while that, for all she and others can prove, it could just as easily have originated in any of the other ships planted in various capitals around the globe. No one has ever seen one of the aliens actually exit their ships, nor have any of the many scientific instruments that surround the placid invaders ever registered a change in the external structure or appearance of the ships. Not so much as a single modulated transmission from the ships has ever disturbed the ether – at least not on any part of the conventional electromagnetic spectrum that humanity knows of. And yet emerge from their ships the Svabhavikakaya undeniably do.

Just ask all the people they've stolen.

If you can find them.

The camera's POV is swooping around, as its operator – one Bert Hanson, the watching woman recalls, married to Sally, two kids – angles for a better shot of the alien in their midst.

But the reason good old Bert is panning, unsatisfied with what he's seeing in his viewfinder, lies not with his skills, but with the creatures from the stars.

The Svabhavikakaya do not photograph well. On emulsion or through lenses, they appear as amorphous blurs. To the naked human eye, they shimmer with a myriad hallucinatory implications, storehouses of potential images. People have reported seeing everything from devil to angel, animal to human to fantastical hybrids thereof. Crystalline multi-tentacled nightmares are frequently described. Roiling coloured storms like miniature Jupiters are also a popular incarnation.

Basically, thinks Alice, *we have been invaded by walking – or hovering – Rorschach blots.*

But could these aliens – any aliens – ever be anything else?

The Svabhavikakaya in this film is floating over the astonished crowd like a migratory burnt spot in the celluloid, moving gently from each to each as if testing, inspecting, marking or anointing. It darts unexpectedly toward the cameraman, filling his lens and the screen Alice watches with foggy whiteness–

And then the image records what a spinning falling camera would see, before it impacts the pavement and smashes.

From among this crowd, beside Bert Hanson, the Svabhavikakaya caused to disappear – to pop away like pricked soap bubbles – three others.

Tina Northrup, age 14, visiting DC with her parents Emily and Fred from Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Milly Hendricks, age 73, resident of the city and simply strolling by the monument with husband Todd.

And out of the arms of her father, Fatima Khouri, age two, daughter of the Egyptian ambassador.

All were complete strangers to each other, no apparent links between them. No relatives of the victims were taken. The selection of these four – one foreigner and three US citizens (citizens for whose safety Alice feels herself ultimately, intimately responsible) – seems utterly random.

All past disappearances were similarly baffling: assorted numbers of victims, occasionally related or acquainted, mostly not. (Not in dispute, however, is the public reaction: outrage, shock, rioting, finger-pointing and pressure exerted from every angle, above and below, on the world's office-holders to *do something*. Short of A-bombing every world capital, however – a measure actually proposed by General Curtis Le May – no solution is readily apparent.)

Yet every intuition in her body, every particle of an intellect honed to Holmesian keenness, tells her that there is a method to the aliens' madness.

The projector is off, the room is dark. She cannot sit here forever. Action must be taken, however futile. In movement, in new situations, in danger, lies the only possibility of discovery.

But never, never any iota of personal relief.

"Lights up," orders Doctor Alice Sheldon, Director of the CIA. Then, "Ursula?"

In what seems like less than a second, Alice's personal assistant is by her side, clutching a sheaf of manila folders to her stark black blouse-front.

"What next, Chief?" chirps Ursula.

Ursula is some 15 years younger than her 50-year-old superior. Bright, quick, dedicated, she is one of the new cadre of personnel Alice has steadily been recruiting, drawing talent from unconventional sources and disciplines in an attempt to bring the CIA fully into the modern era. Ursula's background in anthropology – her parents were both pioneers in the field – provided just the kind of lateral-thinking skills Alice was seeking.

Now Alice regards Ursula's sisterly face full of light, her unblinking stare of devotion – a stare that barely conceals a more problematical, potentially more physical kind of affection, one that Alice is absolutely unable to reciprocate. Not that she might not, under different circumstances, like to. But Alice being what she is – No, impossible.

What the hell can she see in me anyhow? Old maid with short curly hair gone early elderly silver, eyes shadowed and bracketed with tension and responsibility, unstylish, partial to draping this unvoluptuous, burdensome body (disfigured! wounded!) with concealing mannish shirts and trousers. It must be the power, the alpha-mama status, that eternal turn-on, the aphrodisiac of achievement.

Alice runs over her impressive curriculum vitae in her mind, a familiar mantra. Both her medical degree and a PhD in experimental psychology by the tender age of 26. Swept up right after that academic coup by the madness of the Second World War, straight into the grasping, seductive arms of the OSS. Saw things too

scary and hellish and unbelievable to mention by rational daylight in every theatre of combat. (Perhaps that Slothrop affair had been the weirdest...) Staying with the peacetime spooks as they moulted into the CIA, working her way up the ladder the hard way, denied the lubrication of traditional feminine wiles, until final ascension to the throne, appointment by Tricky Dick in '60, her patron now dead, never to complete his coveted second term.

Yes, quite impressive. Easy to see how someone could get their knickers wet over such a single-minded monster of ambition. But it just can't be. Ever. With anyone.

With a sigh, Alice speaks. "I've made up my mind. I'm going out in the field myself. I can't huddle any more down here under the ground. It's too isolated, too claustrophobic. And the reports I've been getting from those idiots we blithely call operatives are worse than useless. I've got to see that ship in person, touch it, kick it, hurl my mind against it. Talk to some of the families of the victims too."

Ursula frowns. "But Chief, we can't have you roaming alone out in the open! And with bodyguards, you'd be too conspicuous. Either way, it's just too dangerous! The Chinese haven't gone away, you know, not to mention the Russkies. They'd both love to get their hands on you! Are you forgetting Saigon?"

The kidnap attempt last year on her fact-finding mission to French Indochina is fresh in Alice's mind. She can still see the pain-contorted faces of the two men she had killed barehanded. Still, she is not to be dissuaded.

"No, my mind's made up. If it makes you rest any easier, though, Ursula, I'll be undercover. Even some kind of disguise, if you want. We'll go the old journalist route. It'll work perfectly. Trust me."

Ursula visibly bites the inside of one cheek to stop from arguing. Then, miraculously, as if prepared for this very eventuality, she whips out one of her omnipresent folders, opens it, and turns it toward her boss.

"Will this do?"

Alice scans the data swiftly. "Good, very good. Reporter for *Holiday* magazine. I assume the editor is in our pocket? Yes, of course. Oh, and a catchy byline, too. Jane Tiptree. I like it."

Ursula sniffs with proprietary pride. "I thought you might."

2 Holiday, Holiday, Do You Read?

Mephistopheles is having his usual day in Hell.

Lot of hard, hot work, constantly jabbing the incandescent pitchfork to the pincushion butts of lesser devils, inventing new vices and temptations and false hopes and tortures for the damned sinners (of which he is without denial the first, the worst, biggest, baddest, and most anguished), flicking anxious glances all the while over his shoulder for the inevitable yet delayed approach of that curiously absent Deity with a fistful of crumpled IOU's and a junkyard-dog glare in His eyes. But there are a not inconsiderable number of compensatory perks that go with the job. Oh, yes, indeed, the perks can almost make one forget.

Almost.

Alfred Bester, editor-in-chief of *Holiday* magazine – sophisticated sister publication to the more yokelish *SatEvePost*, circulation holding nicely thank you at five million, despite the depredations of television and drive-ins, and the tourism-disrupting presence of the Svabhavikakaya – glances now at the permission-granting face of the Westclox atop his cluttered desk. Ten AM. Time for the first serious drink of the day. (No generous soul would count the nip needed upon rising.)

Opening a deep lower-desk drawer, the editor removes a cut-glass decanter of I. W. Harper whisky. (Always patronize advertisers; free booze by the case saves money for other pleasures.) Setting the decanter atop the desk-blotter, he looks inside the drawer for a glass, spots none, swears. He picks up the rubberized waste basket from under the knee-well, rummages among the tattered carbons, mimeographed memos, sheets of onionskin and pencil-shavings, comes up with a paper coffee cup. He pours several fingers of the golden whisky in atop the cold grainy sludge (not all of it coffee grounds), then belts it back.

Better, much better. The editor restores the bottle to its office-infamous hiding place. He takes a pack of Oasis menthols from his inner jacket pocket, taps one out and lights it with the Zippo bearing the inscription, TO ALFIE LOVE NORMA JEAN. This souvenir of a brief affair born of a long-past *Holiday* photoshoot provokes, as always, a mild twinge of nostalgia. Wonder what ever happened to that pretty filly from Burbank after her brief career as the Jantzen swimsuit girl? Have to find out one of these days... Then, as always, the curiosity disappears as fast as the gratefully exhaled smoke.

Ah, now he can concentrate on getting a goddamn magazine out! There're column inches to fill, assignments to be parcelled out like sugarplums or insults, glossies and proofs to pore over. At least till lunch, and that generally lasts three hours. Not that he needs to devote much of his considerable, albeit whisky-dulled intellect to the task. After all, he's been doing this for nearly 20 years, since '47 in fact, right after he got out of radio scripting. A fond fucking farewell to the Green Hornet and the Shadow, kid's crap worse possibly than those garish pulps he'd had a brief fling with back in the '30s.

Of course, he hadn't been head honcho from the start. Just one of six associate editors back then, one of the lesser devils, doing the scutwork, building up his resumé, hoping for a slot to open at one of the really classy men's magazines, *Esquire* or the brand new *Playboy*, say. Even *Rogue*. But those openings had never materialized, and so he had stayed with staid, Philly-based Curtis Publishing, resident bad boy, but one who delivered, moving steadily up the ladder till reaching his present exalted status in '55. A regular sinecure.

Or sinner's curse.

The editor strokes his close-clipped, elegant black vandyke-styled facial hair, smooths back his crowlike brillcremed quills. Not a lick of grey yet, at 52. Top of the heap, scads of women, whisky and song. Maybe he *had* made a brimstone-scented deal somewhere along the line, without remembering. What more could he want?

What more indeed?

Well, enough starry-eyed beachcombing among the wrack of his life. Work commands attention. Hard, vig-

orous, thrusting work.

The editor leans forward and depresses one key of the Dictaphone intercom.

"Miss Minkie Martini, your pretty ass is requested herein forthwith, chop-chop!"

The outer door of the editor's office swings inward, and in walks – sashays – Miss Minkie Martini. She's alluringly attired in a low-cut green silk blouse, black pencil skirt, seamed stockings and heels, her processed curly hair piled high and lacquered in place. Christened Michelle "Micky" Martin, born 1945 in Harlem, this 20-year-old secretary has never heard her given name spoken in the precincts of *Holiday* since the day two years ago when she was first "interviewed" by her new employer, who immediately dubbed her with her swinging new sobriquet.

In return, she gets to call her boss "Alfie."

It's not a bad deal, nor one she really minds, nor even actually ever ponders.

It's just the way the world works.

Swivelling his chair outward, Alfie gestures now imperiously with a broad sweep of one tweed-clad arm and manicured hand. "Okay, babe, assume the dictation position."

Minkie plops down into her boss's lap, finishing her motion with a little lascivious grind. She smells the whisky on him and is grateful, as it improves his disposition.

"God, girl, you look more like Lena Horne every day! But better boobs." Alfie cups them to illustrate his point. "Hey, that's what's missing. Music! Get the stereo going, Minkie."

Rising up off her employer's lap, Minkie swings her hips over to the big Capehart hi-fi in the corner and drops the needle on a platter. Xavier Cugat fills the air. Minkie returns to her post.

"Okay, let's have a rundown on the high-priority items, girl."

From her capacious memory, Minkie begins to reel off the current projects. She is professionally undistracted by Alfie's fingers undoing her blouse buttons.

"The Rome article still needs a writer. You mentioned Perelman or Bemelmans last time–"

"Fuck those old hacks! They're getting too complacent for my tastes. I'm gonna try someone new. Who do we have on tap?

"Well, there was that Malzberg fellow–"

"Yeah, I remember, pushy young Jew who worked for Scott Meredith and was looking to get his foot in the door. Good portfolio, though, and I like that kind of drive. Let's give it to him! He'll start to sweat when he realizes he's gotta perform, and those two old farts will mess their pants. Good fun all around! What's next?"

Alfie has the front of Minkie's blouse completely undone now, revealing her packed Maidenform bra with its pointed cups like a top-of-the-line Studebaker's tailfins. He's deftly toying with the clasp, moving his hand in sinuous teasing circles on her back under the loose silk.

"Well, the Tahiti photos–"

At that moment muted shouts arise from outside, and the door to Alfie's office bursts open. Framed in the entrance is an older silver-haired woman wearing sunglasses, masculine attire.

"Mister Bester, do you know who I am?" she demands with frigid authority. "Do you know the implications of ignoring messages and keeping me waiting?"

"What the fuck do I look like to you, lady? A mind-reader or something?"

Minkie has stood calmly up and is unconcernedly buttoning her blouse. This is not the first time this has happened, nor will it in all likelihood be the last. An underling, ignored, she is simply one of those women no one sees.

Then the intruder speaks a single word.

It is an innocuous noun, one no one would start at. Yet it causes Alfie to jump, then go pale, for it is the code-word for contact with its agents that the CIA has given him.

"Jesus X. Christ! Minkie, make like a magician and disappear. We're not to be disturbed."

Minkie sways out, closing the door behind her. The new woman takes a seat, props one trousered ankle mannishly on her opposite knee, then says, "I'll have a cigarette. And a drink too. And shut off that godawful music."

Alfie is grateful for the distraction. It gives him time to regain his nerve and assurance. By the time the woman is puffing and sipping in silence (he finally finds a relatively clean glass for her in a different drawer), Alfie's jaunty equilibrium is somewhat restored. He studies this woman across from him. One cool customer. Used to giving orders. Definitely not a minor devil. Call her Beelzebub.

Almost as if reading *his* mind, the woman says, "Call me Jane Tiptree. All you need to know about me is that I'm from the Agency, and when I say, 'Jump!', you respond, 'How high?'. Is that clear?"

Although pained, he's still a wiseguy. (Or is that a painwise guy?) "You Jane, me not Tarzan. I got it. Now, how can I help you?"

Jane drops her raised foot to the floor and leans forward, fixing him with a stare as incendiary as the Hungarian Molotov cocktail that took out Khrushchev in '59.

"You're going to do a feature on the Svabhavikakaya. And I'm the writer. Now, given those parameters, where do we begin? I've got some ideas of my own, but I want to see if there are any angles I haven't thought of."

"Jesus, Jane, you've really picked a loser there. The great unwashed don't want to hear word one about the Svabhavikakaya. They scare people shitless. You should know that. And they're death on sales figures! Even *Time* won't put them on the cover any more. Not to mention their, uh, lack of photogenic qualities."

"Don't lecture me! I know all that. But I'm not aiming for a Pulitzer or record-breaking sales, I'm looking to save lives. The lives of your fellow citizens."

Alfie blows a smoke-ring. "Was the name Jane or Joan? Miss Dark, I presume?"

The woman looks ready to explode, so Alfie backs off. "All right, all right." He strokes his beard. "Hmmm, if I had to write about the aliens, I'd probably look for the human-interest angle. Concentrate on the people whose lives they've touched. It might be a kick to visit the Swabbies–"

Brightening, Tiptree says, "The Swabbies? Who are they?"

Alfie can't resist gloating a bit. "Newly formed nut group. Lot of ex-beatniks and hopheads, hodads, hotrod-

ders, dropouts, runaway juvies and Lord Buckley fans. You know, the kind of social outcasts who'd naturally be attracted to such a sick kick. They seem to worship the Svabhavikakaya or something, hence their moniker. Like any cult worth their beads, they're predicting the end of the world. Naturally, they don't much believe in following the usual social norms in the meantime."

"Where are they located?"

"San Francisco. Haight district. The Svabhavikakaya ship at the Presidio is the only one not located in a national capital. They think it's special."

Jane stands. "Goddamn those agents of mine with their heads up their assholes. Worthless, utterly worthless."

At that instant, Alfie recognizes her. She keeps a low profile, never photographed much, but there was that brief testimony during the McCarthy hearings–

"You – you're–"

"Don't say it, or I'll probably have to kill you someday."

Alfie doesn't say her real name, because he fully believes her calm threat.

"Get your 'girl'" – Alfie can hear the quotes in her tone – "on the phone to Pan Am. We're heading west."

"'We?'"

"You've proven your value already. Something tells me you've got more to contribute." Tiptree leans across the desk to poke a rigid finger into his flabby stomach. "And I don't mean anything below the belt."

This old bat is something else! As if anyone'd get hot to trot over her! Alfie takes a sip of his own drink to hide a smile.

"So, do these Swabbies have a leader?"

"Yeah, of course, what bunch of fruitcakes doesn't? And like most messiahs, he's even given himself a new name. He was born Ed Waldo, but now he calls himself Ted Sturgeon. Something about humanity being fish swimming upstream to provide caviar for the aliens."

"Cute," says Tiptree. "A little too cute."

3 Up the Whorls of the Whirled

Lozenges of coloured light – the impressionist sun's painterly efforts made through the medium of outdoor quaking foliage and a stained-glass window in a big ramshackle Victorian house in San Francisco's Haight district – quiver with motion like dreaming jewels on puddled floorboards, until the medusa-tendrils of a wet mop intervene and shatter their coherence.

The mopper's strong-tea-coloured feet are bare. Big knobby toes squinch and clench, clutching the worn wood as he works. Bare too are his trim muscled legs, arms and torso. Only a pair of jeans cut high at the hip – white pockets hang below the ragged hem – keep him decent, although even this garment fails to entirely conceal his ripe manhood.

But his face–

The man's young friendly face is painted with organic swirls of vibrant colour, Maori style, hallucinatory loops and curves streaming from brow to below his jaws, encircling an eye, an ear, bridging his nose, tugging at the corner of his mouth, mapping the carotids.

The garish mopper tracks toward the base of a staircase, his frizzy hair a corona in the sunlight. Music floats down from above, bent notes tortured from an electric guitar.

Doorbell chimes. The mopper stops, leans his implement against the stair's railing, and moves toward the front door.

Opened, the wide heavy door reveals a man and a woman. He's big and fashionable and out of shape, like an overfed circus bear dressed by Saville Row. She's all sinew, wire and nerves, tauter than a straining winch, a stick of TNT disguised as a party-favour.

The man on the doorstep sticks his hand out. "Hi there! We're from *Holiday* magazine, and we're looking for Mister Ted Sturgeon. We were told he lives here..."

Elastic paint stretches, contouring new muscles without cracking as the mopper smiles broadly. But he does not speak.

"Do the Swabbies live here?" asks the woman.

Again, silence. The big man starts to show frustration, his voice rising.

"Listen here, punk! Are you going to let us through this door, or do I have to force my way in?"

"Bester, no, let me handle this–"

A new voice intrudes. "Handle what?"

The newcomer from the dark interior of the house stands protectively behind the young black man, who's still mindlessly grinning. Satyr's face with, curiously, the same pattern of facial hair as the male intruder he confronts. But where Bester is dark and ponderous and office-pale, this protector is tanned, sports wavy auburn hair, twinkling eyes and a ready smile nestled in nets of laughlines that betray his middle age. Clad in a long flowing flowered caftan, he holds himself with an easy grace that hints at a lithe body beneath.

"Well, thank God," says Bester. "Someone with a tongue! I'm Alfie Bester, editor of *Holiday* magazine. This is, um, Jane Tiptree, one our staff writers. We were hoping to speak to a cat named Ted Sturgeon. You see, we're thinking of doing an article on him and his Swabbies."

"I'm Sturgeon. And I'll be happy to talk with you. I talk with anybody, actually, even the press. But I don't know if I particularly want a write-up done on us. Publicity is a loaded gun that points both ways."

Now the woman says, "Nicely put, Mister Sturgeon. It seems as if you speak from personal experience. Have you ever worked in public relations?"

Sturgeon grins knowingly. "Oh, I've held dozens of jobs, Miss Tiptree. Everything from merchant seaman to 'dozer operator to short-order cook to carny barker. But you don't have to be a dairy farmer to recognize the smell of bullshit. Come in, come in."

Sturgeon lays a hand on the bare corded shoulder of the mopper, and the youth steps aside. As he turns, Sturgeon pats the youth's tightly muscled rear-end affectionately, startling a grunt from Bester. Soon the black man is back at his job, and Bester and Tiptree are inside.

The small commotion at the front door has attracted a crowd of Swabbies. Chicks in black leotards and cowl-neck sweaters, guys in sandals and dashikis and ripped chinos. On the stairs, a pockmarked, chubby-faced cat with curly hair stands, clutching the neck of his slung unplugged guitar. A missing finger on one hand proclaims a never-say-die dedication to his music.

Sturgeon addresses his attentive flock. "Okay, okay, friends, nothing to get concerned about, just a pair of charming visitors from the straight world. Back to your

fun and games. Jerry," – addressing the guitarist – "we'll talk about the Fillmore gig later. All right, kids – scat!"

Sturgeon steps deeper into the house, and his visitors follow.

"What's with the mute spade?" Bester asks.

"Chip? A curious case. Showed up on our doorstep one day, dirty, skinny and showing the effects of some serious abuse. Found just the single name scrawled on the waistband of his shorts. Doctors say there's nothing organically wrong with his ears or vocal apparatus, but he just won't talk. Some kind of lasting shock or trauma obviously. Otherwise, he's bright enough, friendly and obliging. You wonder just how much he understands, though."

"Yeah – like when someone's playing god with him."

Sturgeon seems unoffended, unflappable. "We all play god, Mister Bester, whether on the macrocosmic or microcosmic level, like psychologists doing awful things to rats. But ask yourself the next question: do I have what it takes to be a *good* god?"

"Why is his face painted?" asks Tiptree. "I didn't notice it on any of the others."

"He did that to himself, right after the first time he saw a Svabhavikakaya. I think he was trying to reproduce that moiré pattern of the aliens that some people report seeing. It makes him happy and doesn't hurt anyone else, so I don't interfere. A good rule to live by in general, I think."

The trio is in the kitchen now: a sound like rain on a tin roof as a woman shells peas into a chipped enamelled pan by the sink, the smell of oregano and tomatoes from a burbling pot on the stove, an Indian ghost-catcher spinning on its string and hook.

A scoured plank table holds a sleeping cat and two partially melted candles stuck in basketed Chianti bottles. Indicating the railback chairs around the table, Sturgeon says, "Have a seat," then moves to lift a coffeepot off the stove. Juggling pot, cups, sugar bowl and a bottle of cream, the unconventional host soon has his seated guests served. Before sitting himself, he shooes the cat away with a "Down, Hurkle."

"Now, what do you want to know?"

Bester merely sips his coffee, letting his ostensible junior run the show.

"I'm most interested," says Tiptree, "in your beliefs regarding the motives of the Svabhavikakaya – particularly concerning the abductions. Have you ever received anything like a real communication from them? Are their victims still alive, or simply disintegrated? If alive, where are they? Why do they take some humans and not others?"

Sturgeon smiles amiably. "Quite a set of questions, Miss Tiptree. And not exactly the ones I would have expected from someone intent on producing a fluff piece on those decadent, perverted Swabbies. Local reporters usually focus on free love and opium-smoking, neither of which, I'm afraid to report, preoccupies our attention overmuch. Unfortunately, *your* questions are the ones I have no certain answers to. Although I'm the purported leader of this madhouse, I don't pretend to any esoteric knowledge. Like all the rest of our little group, I'm simply a seeker. Although I do have some speculations..."

"Speculations you'd be willing to share?"

Leaning forward as if in confidence, Sturgeon says, "Certainly. I believe that the Svabhavikakaya are here to harvest us. We – or certain among us – provide something they need or desire. And just as the reaper does not address the wheat that falls beneath his scythe, so the aliens ignore us."

Bester snorts. "What the hell could they want from us? These rags on our backs, our prowess as animal slave labour?"

"Not at all, Mister Bester. Such attractions are admittedly ridiculously simplistic. But consider – what if we possessed some rare psychic quality, something the aliens could *extract*, so to speak?"

"Hogwash!" Bester drains his cup. "Say, I don't suppose you'd have a little toot of some hair of the dog around this joint?"

"Why, sure, Mister Bester." Sturgeon now addresses the woman at the sink, who has been patiently stripping the peapods during their colloquy. "Bianca, could you reach down that bottle of Early Times out of the cupboard? That's a dear..."

The woman carries over the liquor and Sturgeon takes it from her, giving her intelligent hands a brief but noticeable caress. He uncaps the bottle, tilts it over Bester's cup, but stops before any liquid can emerge.

"Care to ask the bottle's permission first, Mister Bester?"

Bester reddens, then pushes the neck of the bottle down with a fingertip. Amber chortles out.

Tiptree says, "Are you claiming then, Mister Sturgeon, that the Svabhavikakaya are beings that exist on a higher plane than us, able to discern qualities we cannot?"

"It's quite possible. Here, listen to this." Sturgeon removes a much-creased pamphlet from a caftan pocket. "This is from a work by Professor C. Trungpa, of Oxford University. You know of course that the Tibetans were the ones who first encountered and named the aliens. Well, it turns out that the term they chose to hang on these enigmas has a longstanding meaning in their theology. Here's what Trungpa says:

"'Svabhavikakaya is understanding the whole thing, total panoramic experience, a realization of the totality of what is. Svabhavikakaya is a general state of existence transcending birth, cessation and dwelling. There is just simply existing and opening.'"

His contentious spirits evidently lifted by the liquor, Bester says, "And you claim your bullshit detector is working!"

Before Sturgeon can reply, a blonde Swabbie girl bursts into the kitchen, shouting, "They're out, they're out! A sighting at Fisherman's Wharf!"

The back of the overturned chair bounces once off the floor. Sturgeon's already at the door. "Quickly! If you want to see what we do, then move it!"

Within seconds the entire Swabbie crew, as well as Bester and Tiptree, are crammed into a motley assortment of vehicles and heading toward the waterfront. Thick traffic is heading in the opposite direction, so they make good time.

At the docks, Sturgeon is in the lead as his pack of Swabbies clatter toward a clot of unmoving tourists trapped by the hovering Svabhavikakaya. As in previous cases, the humans seem – not frozen by the inspection of the aliens, but somehow reluctant to

depart. It is not apparent if anyone has yet been taken.

In the quiet, the slap of water on pilings sounds loud as gunshots.

Now the Swabbies manifest their beliefs. Some fall to their knees, hands locked in prayer; others pogo as high as possible, or clamber atop the shoulders of their comrades, attempting to reach the numinous beings. Still others pull a dervish turn.

Sturgeon stands calmly apart, arm around the bare waist of the mute named Chip, Bester and Tiptree tentatively beside the duo. Sturgeon's eyes are closed, a rapt expression on his features, as if striving to project his very soul out of this world well lost.

Suddenly Tiptree exclaims, "The ship!"

From the nearby Presidio military base, the ship of the Svabhavikakaya has lifted, is now above them. Never has this happened before.

The central portion of the bizarre interstellar craft is shaped like the silhouette of a vase or a bull's head, and sprouts twin branches from its wide end, terminating in organic, feathery extrusions. Utterly non-aerodynamic, the ship resembles to a high degree a schematic of the female reproductive system, uterus and fallopian tubes.

This is the flesh-cowled, hidden shape which, due to its coincidental taurine resemblance, once gave rise to the bull as paradoxical symbol of the ancient human matriarchies.

Now it's Bester's turn to exclaim. "Look at the kid!"

Sturgeon opens his eyes, finds Chip's burning face.

The painted lines and whorls on the youth's dark skin have come alive, are squirming and writhing across his unaware countenance like flaming tattoos just beneath his dark skin.

Exhibiting tightly reined composure, Tiptree says, "Has – has this ever happened before?"

"Never."

Then the aliens themselves are on them.

Air rushes in to fill the spaces where Sturgeon, Bester and Tiptree once stood. Facepaint now inanimate, Chip remains behind–

–falls to his knees–

–and wails.

4 Harsh Smoke Rises Up Forever on a Hudson Bay Blanket

She is twelve years old again in body and mind, as yet whole and unmutilated.

But the scarred, scared 50-year-old woman is somehow also present inside the head of the pubescent girl, observing with utter disbelief the audiovideo, sensual feed being piped into whatever prison pocket of neurons holds the elder, time-travelling awareness.

Not this, thinks Alice Sheldon. *Lord, I can't live through this again, especially knowing what it means, and still stay sane.*

The year is 1927. She is in a hut of the nameless-to-her Kenyan tribe – herders, poor, emaciated and migratory – who rescued an orphaned white child, still then a snot-nosed toddler, eight years ago from beside the corpses of her parents. (What vile tropical bug the Sheldons succumbed to that simultaneously spared the child, what virus or poison brought down that adventurous, yet certainly foolhardy couple who thought nothing of bringing their daughter along on their dangerous expeditions, Alice will never know, just as whatever name her native rescuers went by is buried in the unrecoverable past. By the time she is reclaimed for "civilization" by the members of a Rhodesian safari and sent Stateside to inherit her patrimony and be raised by an elderly aunt, the scavengers and weather and insects will have long rendered any autopsy impractical.

But right now, right this moment, she is still a foundling, an adopted member of the tribe.

And this tribe practices female circumcision.

Oh, but why be mealy-mouthed? Alice never is on other topics. Call it what it is.

Female genital mutilation. Clitoredectomy, the premed Alice Sheldon reads in one of her texts.

Feels daily with painful urination, *sees* daily in her mirror.

Virgin's mirror. Even after half a century, the virgin's only observer is her mirror.

Now the hardly-an-adolescent, yet still somehow threatening-to-the-powers-that-be female squirms her bare little sun-bronzed butt on the scratchy trader's blanket, a little anxious about what can possibly be at issue here, yet reassured by the presence of familiar aunts and girl cousins. Smoke and light imprint themselves forever on her cortex, from inside which the elder Alice is screaming, *Get up! Run! Fight! Do something!*

But the child she once and forever was cannot hear her.

The headman is approaching, intoning the buzzy, clicking tribal ritual phrases, and women – traitorous women! – pinion her shoulders to the blanket. Too late, she panics.

Who is making me relive this! It has to be the Svabhavikakaya. Damn them forever! I should have blown my head off any of those scores of times I held the gun aimed selfward and hesitated.

Now the headman is kneeling between her parted legs. The knife is descending, soon it will bite and swallow her whole future–

A hand clutches the headman's wrist.

"Drop it!"

The knife falls to the blanket.

Alice sees her improbable, anachronistic rescuer is Bester.

She's standing as a naked adult within a lambent space, a large capsule that seems to be a fuzz-edged ovoid of grey fog. Light diffuses from all directions.

An ovary of the ship?

Alice reaches down, cups her genitals one-handed in disbelief. Although she has no adult experience in what being normal should feel like, she absolutely knows she's whole down there. Her tentative fingers are enfolded by labile plies of plush organic symmetry.

Bester stands beside her, naked too. But he's not the same man, any more than she is the same woman. He's been broken down, demolished and rebuilt to what he might have been if treated less harshly by life, altered in mind and body.

"It's the aliens doing this to us, isn't it?" Alice asks.

"Who else?"

Tentatively, Alice stretches a hand forward to touch Bester's chest.

Then they're pressed against each other almost as if pushed by outside forces, irresistible impulsions. *A cosmic rape?* thinks Alice. But then she senses some kind of rightness in her actions, an obedience to a plan of love and death. Tensions of a lifetime melt within her. It is good to abandon a world well lost.

Now Alice is eager, Bester too. Their breaths mingle as they kiss. Alice feels wetness seeping from within her, slicking her thighs. She drops a hand to Bester's penis and clutches stiffness.

They're on the yielding floor of this no-place. Bester's on his back, Alice straddling him, yet still unpierced.

Then she drops forcefully to take him inside her with a modicum of pain and blood, and an undreamt-of pleasure.

She starts to feed him her hot little tits.

Someone's whispering in her ear from behind, while tracing sensuous lines on her back. It's Sturgeon, a second seducer, somehow necessary complement to Bester, angel to match devil. She rests motionless while his words drip their honey.

"I've spoken to them," the Swabbie guru says. "The Svabhavikakaya. They're gestalt personalities. They've been trying to assemble similar beings out of humans, for reasons still unclear. But they haven't had any luck. Until us. Somehow the three of us will mesh into something greater, a godbody, if you will, possessing certain gifts and duties. They only had to deburr you two a bit first."

The words stop. Alice feels the engorged tip of the second man's penis trail down the crack of her buttocks, leaving a trail of male lubricant.

Then Sturgeon makes three, opening up a perpetual taste of being.

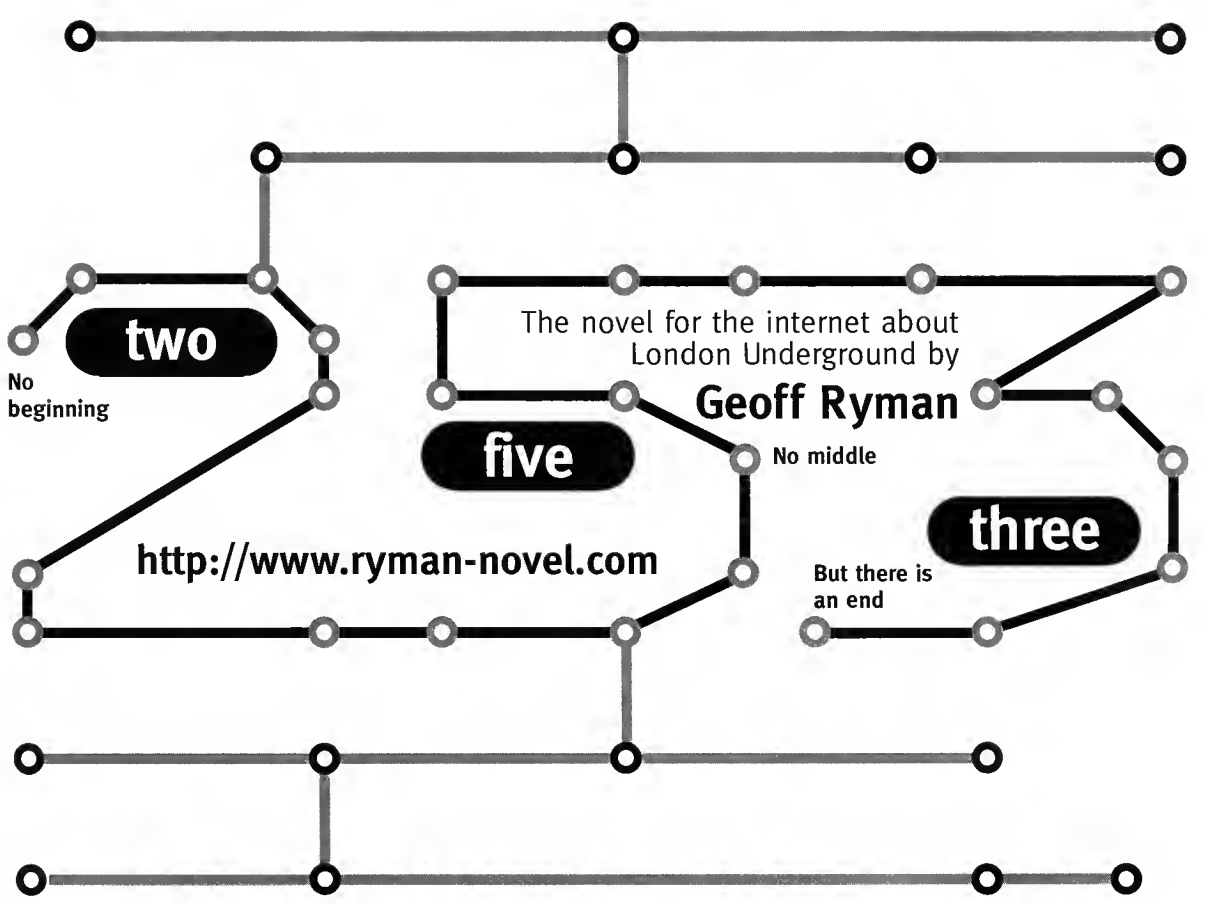
5 She Is Born For All Men Who Wait

The exhausted, numb Swabbies pick themselves up off the wharf's planking. Their leader and the two visitors are gone. So is the ship of the aliens. So, they somehow realize, is every one of the interstellar wombs anywhere on the planet.

The youth named Chip raises a tear-streaked face to the skies. In a cloud formation over the Bay he sees a tripartite face like a Tibetan deity's that quickly flows under the slow-sculpting knife of the winds into a single androgynous mask.

Mother in the sky.

Paul Di Filippo is the author of the collections The Steampunk Trilogy (1995) and Ribofunk (1996). His last story in this magazine was "Life Sentence" (issue 111). Born in 1954, he lives in Providence, Rhode Island.



A Sudden Wild Mage

A Rough Guide to Diana Wynne Jones

Diana Wynne Jones is one of the most respected and best-loved fantasy writers in Britain – which creates a problem for her fans: it's almost impossible to pick up her novels second-hand, because readers just don't part with them. Diana herself is tall, imposing, full of warmth and humour, and 50-something going on 17, with a mass of tangled black hair. On the rare occasions when her health allows her to go to conventions (in recent years she has had to undergo major spinal surgery), it becomes evident how deeply regarded she is by the British sf community.

Her books – around 30 of them to date – are mainly fantasy (and a few sf) novels for teenagers; she has also written four books for younger children. Magic lies at the heart of all of them, and many of them have Celtic, Norse and other myths underlying them – Eight Days of Luke *(1975), for example, has the Norse gods Loki, Woden, Thor and others messing up the lives of ordinary people today. How important are such mythic characters to her?*

Diana Wynne Jones: The nature of archetypes is that they say an awful lot; they're infinitely meaningful. They don't just say one thing, they say a situation. This is what fantasy books do: they take a situation and make it as universal as possible, while also making it individual and exciting; fantasy is a field that things are bound to last in because you can do so much by using this myth archetype. I do it not exactly consciously; I think I must think like that. The books come ... it's like there's this huge still pond which is the myth, and I throw a stone in, and the rings spread.

And what about magic?

DWJ: There are several thousand different kinds of magic – marvellous quantities, enough for any occasion – and of course the magic that puts itself forward as the kind for that particular book plays a great part in determining the mood of the book and what it is about. But I always have to remember that magic is morally neutral and is not going to solve problems on its own. That's not what magic is about. At its simplest, it can be rather like a simile. For instance, in *Witch Week*, the plot takes the notion of a "witch hunt" literally, and witchcraft becomes a metaphor for persecution of people for things they can't help. But even there it is wider than that. The great thing about magic is its wideness. It expands possibilities and makes a positive view possible.

From her first teenage novels, Wilkins's Tooth (1973), The Ogre Downstairs *(1974) and* Eight Days of Luke *(1975), Diana Wynne Jones has established herself as one of Britain's finest – and often funniest – fantasy writers. Many of her books are standalone novels, but she has done several linked works – though often with long gaps between the constituent parts. 1993 saw the long-awaited fourth book in her fantasy series set in Dalemark,* The Crown of Dalemark *(which has just won a Mythopoeic Award), following* Cart and Cwidder *(1975),* Drowned Ammet *(1977) and* The Spellcoats *(1979); and her Chrestomanci series of* Charmed Life *(1977),* The Magicians of Caprona *(1980),* Witch Week *(1982) and* The Lives of Christopher Chant *(1988) is also enormously popular. The hilarious* Howl's Moving Castle *(1986) was followed by the sequel* Castle in the Air *in 1990. Is she planning anything else in any of these series?*

DWJ: I am certainly planning a new Chrestomanci book and I hope to get to the writing stage of it soon. There is also another book about Howl (or two) bobbing about at the back of my head, but so far I haven't been able to get a clear sight of it (or them).

Her move to an enthusiastic editor at Gollancz has seen three new titles this year. First, in March came The Tough Guide to Fantasyland, *which is exactly what it says it is: an invaluable handbook for anyone going on a package tour (or worse, a series of three tours) to Fantasyland. Its 200-odd entries range alphabetically from Adept to Zombies, by way of Confrontations, Gnomic Utterances, Quest Objects and Underwear ("optional and largely nonexistent"). This book is particularly useful for telling you about the companions you're likely to have to put up with on your tour: perm any five or six out of a Bard, Female Mercenary, Gay Mage, Imperious Female, Large Man,*



Photo: David V. Barrett

David V. Barrett

Serious Soldier, Slender Youth, Small Man, Talented Girl, Teenage Boy, Unpleasant Stranger, and Wise Old Stranger. The younger ones, of course, might turn out to be Missing Heirs, or Princes or Princesses in disguise. As for Gods, Sex and Virgins, one must regretfully but perhaps wisely draw a discreet veil... The Tough Guide *is full of useful advice: "Be wary of Runes, even if they appear to say only 'Made in Gna'ash'." Having read it, you'll never read another genre fantasy novel without mentally ticking off all the clichés beautifully and often lovingly satirized in this book. (And you will never want to face Stew again.)*

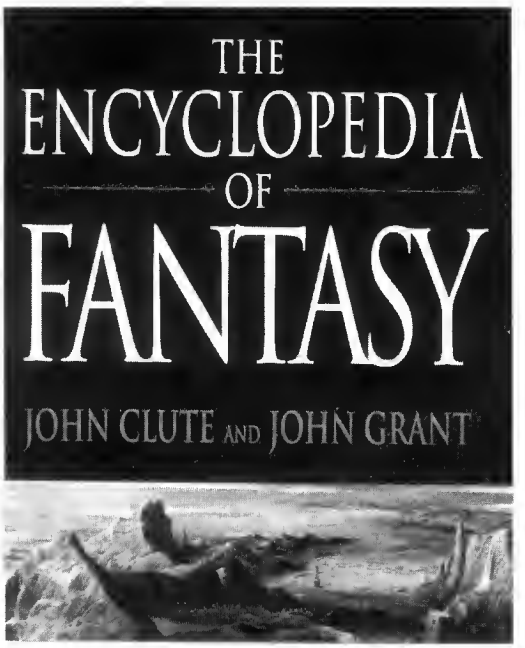
It's an absolutely delightful book, which must have been great fun to write; where did it spring from?

DWJ: *The Tough Guide* came about because I was very bored and frustrated while I recovered from yet another operation. A friend, Chris Bell, offered to save my reason by getting me to help her work on *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* [editors John Clute and John Grant; forthcoming from Orbit in April 1997]. So we began going through the editors' alphabetical list of topics, adding our comments, and discovered from very early on that whenever we reached a particular cliché we were speaking in unison. "Galley slaves," we chorused, "is what happens to the male hero after he is enslaved." And a little later, "Gladiator. The other thing a male slave does." About the time we chanted, "Nunneries are for sacking," I said, "You know, I could almost write the guidebook for the country all this happens in." Then I thought, And why not? So I spent the rest of my convalescence doing just that, and great fun it was too.

The second of this year's bumper crop has an odd history, which shows just how restricting, if not actively stupid, publishers' categorizations can be. Diana Wynne Jones's first (and non-sf) novel, Changeover *(1970), was for adults, but since then she has been firmly marketed as a children's writer.* A Sudden Wild Magic *was first published in 1992 in American hardcover, followed by a US paperback in January 1994. Why did we have to wait until July 1996 for a UK edition? Because Diana Wynne Jones is a* teenage fantasy writer, *and this is an adult novel (the phrase "adult fantasy" is somewhat open to misinterpretation). The plea that probably more adults than teenagers read her books fell on deaf ears at her previous publishers, Methuen; they just weren't interested.*

DWJ: *A Sudden Wild Magic* was a book I was actually asked to write by a British editor some years ago. At least, to be fair, she asked me to write a fantasy for adults. She was, I think, a trifle dismayed at what she got and did not seem to know what to do about it. My agent eventually lost patience with her doubts and sent it to the adult branch of the firm in America that published my books for children. The idea was that Methuen (a branch of Reed Books) might bring the book out in England, but they were smitten by the same trouble as the lady who asked me to write it. I never could get out of either of them what was worrying them so. They said things like, "Well, it's not like other fantasies" – which they clearly meant as an adverse criticism.

In A Sudden Wild Magic *Britain is protected by a group of practising magicians known as the Ring. They discover that there is a parallel*



Earth, Arth, which is leaching magical ideas from them by initiating problems such as wars and global warming on Earth, and learning from how our magicians cope with them magically. Discovering that the Arth magicians are all male, the Ring send a Task Force of female magicians to subvert them, wreaking havoc in their monastically-ordered lives in the nicest possible way.

It's a fun story, with some great characters and a lovely line in humour – and also an unusual blending of light and dark; it's not afraid to look at the less pleasant side of human nature, including the abuse of magic, either through ignorance and carelessness, or intentionally for power.

This is a feature of several of her books. Some of the things her characters get put through are more chilling than any hack and splatter horror novel. In Fire and Hemlock *(1985), which draws on the ancient Scottish song "Tam Lin" in which the powers of faerie try to entrap mortals, she builds up the fear and tension beautifully; my nightmares are still haunted by one scene in which utterly commonplace street rubbish is given a horrific malevolence, swirling around and trying to enfold and entrap the heroine. The scene is only a couple of pages long, but the feeling of terror seems to go on for ever. Why this dark streak in so many of her books?*

DWJ: I never have deluded myself that life was all sweetness, comedy and light. If I was ever tempted, memories of my truly awful childhood would set me right all the time. I do like books to tend to the positive and the main characters to win, but it seems to me that, as in life, you have to gain the positive in the face of things that are dark and dreadful. And another thing: I have always found that moments of the most hilarious comedy seem to come hand in hand with real, deep tragedy. For instance, all the time my father lay dying (protractedly from cancer) a mob of students who had heard that my sisters were very beautiful were beating on our front door, chanting, "We want women! We want women!" Nothing would induce them to leave.

I've heard that a lot of children's writers had unhappy childhoods.

DWJ: I have heard that too. I can certainly vouch for mine. My early life was so bizarrely bad that when I came to put some of it in *The Time of the Ghost* I felt bound to tone the details down, because no one would believe the actual facts. We were made to live in an unheated outhouse, some 50 yards away from the main house where our parents lived. Most of our clothes were cast-offs from Barnado's. We were allowed one penny per week pocket-money, until I was 15, when my father grudgingly increased it to sixpence on condition that we bought our own soap and toothpaste. As the eldest, I had to do the washing and make clothes for my sisters. As the eldest, too, I got the blame for most things: for instance, when my youngest sister tied her hair in knots to keep it out of her eyes. After six months, this was noticed, and I was blamed. Etcetera.

November 1996 saw a new short-story collection, Minor Arcana. *(For avid collectors, four of the seven stories also appeared in the limited edition NESFA collection* Everard's Ride: *1,000 copies only, published for the members of Boskone 1995, an American convention at which Diana was guest of honour.) Her earlier UK collection,* Warlock at the Wheel and Other Stories *(1984) was very much aimed at the children's market; this one isn't. Several of the stories are,*

shall we say, ageless; "The Sage of Theare," about a bunch of gods who are losing their touch, and "Dragon Reserve, Home Eight," a Zenna Henderson-like story about a girl with paranormal powers, were also in Warlock at the Wheel. *Some, such as "What the Cat Told Me" and "nad and Dan adn Quaffy" also have a huge streak of fun bubbling through them. But the long novella "The True State of Affairs" must be the bleakest and most adult piece she has ever had published. Set in the middle of a civil war in Dalemark, the story chronicles in poignant detail the developing love between two prisoners in a fortress, who only ever see each other from a distance. She wrote the story nearly 30 years ago, but there was no way it could ever have been published while she was still stuck in the "teenage fantasy" ghetto.*

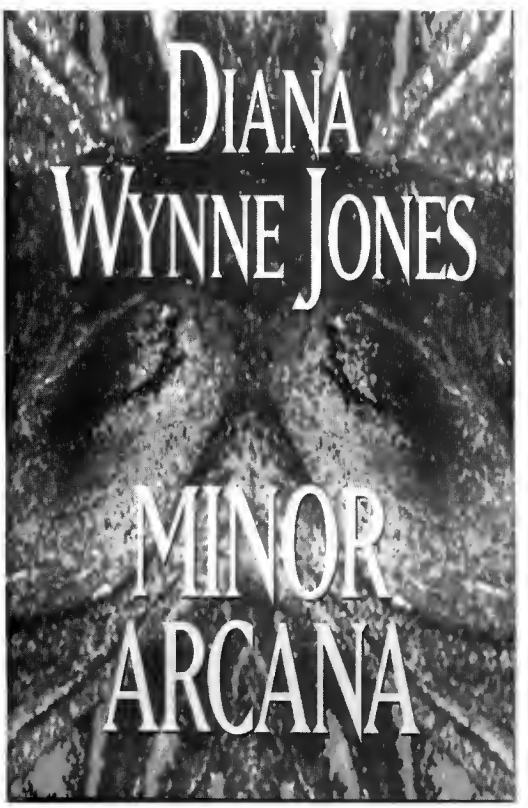
DWJ: That's true. I was very grateful to NESFA for wanting any and all of the unpublished material I had and then marketing it, albeit in a limited edition, for anyone who was interested, regardless of their age. Thirty years ago, I did make an effort to interest an agent in "The True State of Affairs." That was in the days when Tolkien was still causing raised eyebrows (an eminent professor writing fairy stories! Tut!) and the agent handed me back the story unread. People, she said, weren't interested in stuff that was nothing to do with the real world. Had I thought of taking up some other career? That of a wife and mother, for instance? Ah well.

While she is not primarily thought of as a short-story writer, it's a medium which clearly suits her. She has also edited a couple of anthologies. How important does she think the short story form is? And does she enjoy writing novels and short stories equally?

DWJ: For a long time, I didn't find short stories easy to write. They have wholly different dynamics from those of novel length; but they take exactly the same amount of preparation, energy and knowledge – deep knowledge of the characters and situations in them for a start – and probably require rather more emotional force. It took me years to realize that I do have plenty of ideas that are better adapted to a short form. It was just a question of seeing which they were. I think that, all the same, I enjoy writing longer stories more. There is space in something the length of a novel for things to happen that I don't expect. I love being surprised by something I am writing.

It's not unusual for writers to draw on their own experiences in their work, but according to the Introduction to Minor Arcana *the reverse also happens: several of Diana's stories are almost precognitive, in that her life sometimes seems to follow her fiction.*

DWJ: Yes, my books come true on me all the time. The worst example was probably the repeated broken neck from *The Lives of Christopher Chant*. Last year it was discovered that I was walking about with my neck broken in several places. And after writing *Witch Week*, which takes place at Hallowe'en in an old-fashioned boarding school, I found I had to spend the next Hallowe'en night in a huge, deserted, old-fashioned boarding school. Things out of *Fire and Hemlock* occurred all the time I was writing the book and for some time after it was done. And *Drowned Ammet* came true on the first occasion I went near a boat after writing



the book (about eight years later). Anyone who has read *Drowned Ammet* will know that if you invoke certain gods by name, an island rises out of the sea under your boat and breaks the boat in half. This may have been the fault of captain and crew, who particularly asked me to invoke these gods as I christened the boat. So I did. And an island, covered with grass, duly rose out of the sea under the boat. Luckily, she was a catamaran and in two halves anyway. I have a photo of her sitting up on the island like the Ark on Ararat.

Going back to the limited edition NESFA collection, the title story "Everard's Ride" is actually a long novella, or perhaps a short novel, about some Victorian youngsters who find themselves in a medieval fantasy world collocated with their own. Might we ever see an expanded version of this as a stand-alone novel?

DWJ: "Everard's Ride" is actually standard length for a children's book at the time it was written. It is the last – and much the best – of a series of books I wrote while I was teaching myself how to write. Reed Books have seen it, but are not interested. I am just glad that it has made it into print after all this time. It was written around 1968.

What next? Another adult novel, perhaps? Or are Gollancz simply going to publish Diana as herself, whatever the age of her characters?

DWJ: Gollancz, bless them, are going to publish my latest book too, which is probably primarily for adults, but all teenagers should enjoy it as well. It is called *Deep Secret* and a large part of it takes place at a convention for readers of speculative fiction. Those who have read the latest draft agree that it is exactly like conventions are (the lifts, naturally, cease to work and the cause is, as I have always suspected, magical) and real aliens appear in the masquerade. The idea actually came to me when I discovered a Jewish tenet that there are 36 wise men (all probably expert Kabbalists) at large in the world, busy seeding us with ideas that coax everyone's minds in the direction intended by Providence. These are the Magids of the book. Some of them are dead, but still quite influential. Others are young and make serious mistakes.

It might be an idea not to read that one at conventions!

Like it or not, and whatever Gollancz do, it's as a teenage writer that Diana Wynne Jones will probably continue to be best known. On her study door she has a list of "Ten Reasons Why I Write for Children" by the late Isaac Bashevis Singer. Among these are:

> They still believe in God, the family, angels, devils, witches, goblins, logic, clarity, punctuation and other such obsolete stuff.
>
> They love interesting stories, not commentary, guides or footnotes.
>
> When a book is boring they yawn openly, without any shame or fear of authority.
>
> They don't expect their beloved writer to redeem humanity. Young as they are, they know that it is not in his power. Only adults have such childish illusions.

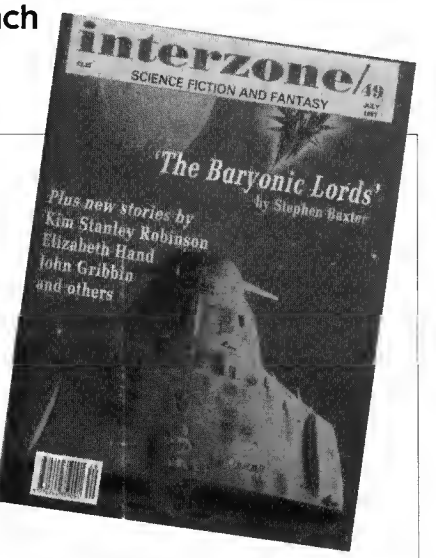
To these she has added, "Anyone who fulfils these conditions qualifies, whatever their age." That probably applies to most of her readers – and certainly to herself. ■

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THE MIND SLICE

William Spencer

"You say the price is five hundred thousand?"

The salesperson nodded blandly. Take it or leave it seemed to be the message.

Gregor pulled a face. "Steep, isn't it? That's more than most people earn in six months!"

"Yes, but look what you're getting," the salesperson soothed, sensing that a deal was near. "A wealth of knowledge. A lifetime's experience. The skills of a master. The vision of a genius."

Gregor still hesitated. It was true that Neilsen was the leading painter of his generation. The finest neo-post-impressionist around. Everyone instinctively liked his work. Not since Claude Monet, 150 years earlier, had there been an artist of such universal appeal.

"And there's another aspect to this," the salesperson continued. "When Neilsen decided to publish a mind-slice, he knew that he would have to forego any further original work by himself."

"I don't quite see..."

"Obvious, when you come to think about it. Everyone who buys this mind-slice becomes in effect another Neilsen. All the skill, all the experience, all the perception – all these are transferred directly to the brain of the purchaser. The exclusivity of the master's work is lost. Who can tell whether a new painting is authentically by his hand? The market value of any new work must slump. The upshot of this is that from now on he won't be producing any new work."

"I'd heard he'd been forced to stop painting anyway. Arthritis in both hands."

"Where did you hear that? Nowadays, there are injections. Expensive... but for a man of Neilsen's wealth..."

"Maybe it wasn't arthritis. Maybe it was alzheimer's."

"Whatever... It all comes down to the same thing. No more Neilsens on the market. You'll have no competition from that direction. You'll have a clear field."

Oh well, thought Gregor. I can always go some way into the red, until my next salary transfer comes through.

"Right," he said. "I'll take it."

The salesperson allowed himself a tiny smile. Gregor extended his hand and put it into the slot of the scanner. The machine beeped as it read the tiny flake of silicon embedded under the skin.

An awkward thought came to Gregor.

"One question. I take it this is OK with the standard reader and headband?"

The salesperson was engrossed in the readout from Gregor's chip. "Um. Yes and no. You can get satisfactory results with the standard gear." He pressed a key on the transaction monitor. "But to bring out the full chromatic potential – bearing in mind how important the visuals are in this case – you need one of the new fourteen-fifty-eights. All a question of throughput as measured in gigaflics per sec."

"Quite... quite," murmured Gregor. Good grief, he thought, that will be at least another 50,000. Oh well, now was no time to practise false economy...

"I'll take a fourteen-fifty-eight too," he gulped, nervously watching the display on the transaction monitor.

The weekend would be the first opportunity for Gregor to test out his new purchases.

In a way, that only added to the pleasure. Having to wait three days allowed an increased build-up of anticipation, an extended interlude in which to savour the enjoyment to come.

His mood was only slightly clouded by the arrival of a rude e-mail from his bank. Such mundane intrusions could not quell his euphoria.

During odd moments of the working week, Gregor rehearsed his reasons for splashing out on the expensive new purchases. It was part of his life-long love affair with the visual arts. He'd tried his own hand with a brush and proved himself to be a passable sparetime painter of sorts. For years now he'd been a member of the local art society and regularly contributed a handful of paintings to the annual exhibition. His work sold, now and then, but at low prices which just about covered his outlay on those and other works that didn't sell.

Deep down, Gregor knew that the paintings produced by himself and fellow amateurs were timid and conventional in the extreme. They would never set the world on fire. Realizing this, he'd attended all sorts of courses. But always there seemed to be a glass ceiling clamped above him, confining his talent, and preventing his work from rising to the level of greatness.

All this was made the more irksome, because Neilsen, the neo-post-impressionist master, the man who had taken the art world by storm, painted like a glorified amateur. His style, magnificent as it was, represented the apotheosis of Sunday painting. He hit fair and square the aiming point towards which amateur efforts tended, but to which they would never in a million years attain.

It was ironic, and not a little galling.

For at least a generation before Neilsen came on the scene, it was the amateur artists who had kept alive the craft of easel-painting. The professionals meanwhile had been busy with strange projects of their own – immersing killer whales in glass tanks, wrapping mountains in flexi-film, inking the bottoms of their models and getting them to squat saucily on virgin canvas. Anything rather than wield a brush or uncap a tube of paint. The professionals behaved as if they were allergic to the odour of linseed oil and the reek of raw

turpentine.

Meanwhile the poor benighted amateurs remained true to the traditions of Velasquez and Van Gogh, of Rembrandt and Renoir. They strove to attain authenticity of brushwork, they plumbed the mysteries of colour-mixing, they practised laying dark against light and fat over lean. They studied atmospheric perspective, exploited the clash of complementary colours, struggled to master the dynamics of pictorial composition according to the golden mean.

Then along came Neilsen – and a cohort of imitators and hangers-on. They, as professionals, restored the glory of paint, reinstated the use of oil-colours and the ancient paraphernalia of canvas and easel. They had the audacity to follow in the footsteps of Constable, Turner and the French Impressionists, and paint directly from nature.

The public loved them, and flocked to buy their work. But the poor amateurs were left completely in the shade – their work outclassed and shown up for the tawdry stuff that it was.

When the weekend came Gregor eagerly got out his new purchases. He took his paints and easel to the conservatory at the back of the house where he often went to paint. He seated himself in his favourite wicker chair and positioned the headband firmly round his temples. The black disc of the slice-reader, strapped to the top of his head, gave him the appearance of some ancient Japanese personage.

The mind-slice responded to his brain rhythms, and began to project a cluster of images.

Appearing within his field of vision was a segment of alternative space – not quite "outside" in the real world, nor "inside" like an image in his head. He found his attention drawn to a "read.me" file which formed an introduction to the contents of the mind-slice.

Neilsen himself appeared, hovering in the anomalous space before Gregor. He began to deliver a kind of homily on how wise Gregor had been in choosing to purchase this particular mind-slice. The hidden text of the message seemed to be that it was a privilege for lesser mortals like Gregor to share in the secrets of a master-craftsman.

Gregor couldn't help noticing how scruffy the great artist was. He was shocked to observe how Neilsen's thinning grey hair straggled unwashed over his dandruffed shoulders, and that the jacket he was wearing was streaked and encrusted, not just with gobs of dried paint where Neilsen had wiped his brush on the fabric, but with the nauseous remains of fast-food dishes hurriedly eaten in the studio.

Gregor made an effort to ignore the man's unkempt appearance and to concentrate on what he was saying.

"From here onwards you will no longer see me, Neilsen. Rather, you will *become* me. I shall present my thoughts to you as though they were your thoughts. All you will have to do is follow your impulses – because they will be promptings I shall place in your brain. Trust your impulses. Go with the flow."

The final banality made Gregor wince slightly. Had he spent his hard-earned credit on a dud purchase? Was the man a mere poseur, a pompous nonentity, despite his keen-eyed observation and adroit brushwork?

Before he could pursue this disquieting train of thought, the image before him faded. At once he felt a seismic shift in his internal sensations. He found himself diminished, as though his own thought-processes had become confined to a small fenced-off region inside his head. From this vantage point he could only watch helplessly, as some hugely powerful force seized the initiative and took over the running of his life. But it was not altogether unpleasant: there was a sense of total freedom, of exhilaration, of surging power unleashed.

Truths dawned on him which should have been obvious all along. Why hadn't he seen them before?

Nothing mattered any more. Life was all there for the taking. A monstrous system of interlinked barriers, petty restrictions that he had timorously imposed on himself, accretions from the past – from childhood even – all these prohibitions and phobias had suddenly fallen away. They fled from him like ghosts that retreat in disarray, gibbering faintly before the dawn of day.

He looked around him.

The light had changed. His vision was rinsed clean, and he saw the world with new eyes.

Each object presented itself to him more clearly, more vividly, than ever before. There were facets and planes of colour, hues more vibrant than any he had seen, tricky shifts of angle that clashed against each other, locked in a silent interplay that told of inexhaustible energy below the surface.

He felt as if he could gaze at the scene before him for ever, seeing it as though for the first time. With each second he was seeing deeper into the substance of things, and watching the ever-changing glory of the light as the scudding clouds moved over the sky, causing a new revelation with each moment.

As he gazed, the urge to paint what he saw came over him. He moved to set up a canvas on the easel, and to lay out his paints in readiness. He moved with unhurried deliberation, with a majestic sense of purpose, confident of his new powers and eager to depict what was now revealed.

As soon as he opened his paint-tray, his mood changed. A cry of disgust came from his lips as he saw that tubes of all the wrong pigments were lying there. Angrily he seized the useless paints and hurled them away from him – the dull ochres and umbers and siennas, the mars black and paynes grey. A frightening rage gripped him as he tossed aside naples yellow, prussian blue and alizarin. His quiver of brushes also disgusted him. They were far too small – piddling, twitchy little tufts of hair. And the blank canvases, stacked against the wall, were puny-sized and useless.

As his anger built up and tore through him, it became more and more alarming. His heart thumped dangerously. Gregor was forced to disengage from the mind-slice.

The after-effects stayed with him. He still felt his heart pounding, and his breath came in shallow, rapid gasps.

When he'd calmed down a little, he sent a fax to his artists' suppliers with a list of pigments he now knew to be essential: cadmium orange, cobalt violet, viridian, cerulean blue, cadmium scarlet. Bright singing colours as intense as the flash of a butterfly's wing or the blaze of a tropical bird's plumage. Burning like wedges of light from gemstones or polished glassware. He ordered, too, some brushes of decent size – number twelve filberts –

and spacious canvases to go with them.

A couple of hours later, a drone brought his supplies to the door. But by then he judged it too late to begin a painting that day. He would not admit it to himself, but the intensity of vision that came to him from the mind-slice, and the subsequent wild rage that followed the realization of the total inadequacy of his painting gear, had left him drained and exhausted.

The weekend still had another day to run.

Bright and early on the Sunday, Gregor set himself up in the conservatory with his new paints and bigger brushes. He poured out turpentine in the dipper, laid out his palette with the new pigments, and clamped one of the new larger canvases onto the easel. Then he clipped on the headband, loaded with the mind-slice.

This time, the introductory pep-talk by Neilsen was bypassed, and he went straight into painting mode.

From his petty vantage point in a corner of his own brain, Gregor braced himself as the powerful energies gripped him. His vision shook and shimmered, then cleared and intensified.

The scene before him, the ordinary corner of the conservatory with its battered old chair and potted plant, was transfigured into something extraordinary and breathtaking. He saw it now as part of a magic land, full of vibrant colour and thrusting spatial energies. The objects in his field of view were not just objects – they were pools of green and blue, shafts of purest scarlet, molten flows of fierce yellow, patches of unplumbed purple.

Seizing a brush decisively, he dipped it in purest colour and began to lay in a series of bold, rhythmic strokes on the canvas.

Each stroke, each gesture of the brush, led with inexorable visual logic to the need for the next stroke, and the next. The work grew like a developing organism, as sweetly as a flower unfolding.

Time went by uncounted, unrecorded. Was he tasting a supreme joy, or was he totally unconscious as he worked away at the canvas? Was it he, Gregor, who so toiled, or was it Neilsen – or was the easy-flowing activity a self-sustaining process that was totally impersonal? Was he experiencing the most intense kind of existence, or was his identity lost and submerged like a drop of water in the ocean?

All he knew was that, after an unchronicled interval, the work grew to completion. Suddenly he recognized that the point had been reached where any further application of paint, the smallest further caress of the brush, would be utterly superfluous – would simply detract from the consummation already attained.

Drawing a deep breath, he laid down his brush, and disengaged from the mind-slice.

On Monday morning he realized that there was no point in going as usual to his place of work. The office life was meaningless to him now. He had better ways to occupy his time. He had begun a new life, and a new career.

Eagerly he laid out his paints, and buckled on the mind-slice. With greedy impatience he took up his brush.

As day followed day, the spate of his productivity was undiminished. The stack of completed works, leaning against the wall of the conservatory, grew and grew. He sent out for more canvases, and extra supplies of paint. He worked hour by hour in an ecstasy of steady absorption.

Sometimes, if the day was fine, he went out into the garden to paint. A patch of wall, a climbing rose, a trailing creeper, a single flower or even a single leaf, was subject enough. Often he simply painted the same scene over again – especially the same familiar corner of the conservatory, which had been his first subject. It never palled, and he never grew tired of observing it. Each day he discovered new qualities of light, and discerned new subtleties of colour. His paint began to take on a thicker, more authoritative texture, and to achieve ever more burning intensities.

One morning a fax arrived from his bank. He glanced at it casually and tossed it aside, having registered that it contained some kind of threat. He knew now that such things were an irrelevance. He had no time, and no energy, to devote to such trivia – which were only of concern to those who were blind to the glories of colour around them. Such people were to be pitied. But he could not spare the time to worry about them. Let the accountants go and dig their own graves.

Sometimes he sent out for ready-dishes of fast food, and cans of drink to wash them down. Sometimes he forgot to do so. Often a piping hot dish would remain at his elbow as he worked, until it grew cold. Then he would throw it into the trash can. The exhilaration that he felt, the excitement of his vision, was fuel enough. The stack of completed canvases continued to grow bulkier.

At times he asked himself why he did not try to sell the finished works, why he ignored them so completely?

The fact was that they held no interest for him whatsoever. He had not the slightest desire to look at them again, or to do anything with them.

It had come to him that the value of painting lay in the process itself. The finished product was almost incidental, as the outcome of that sustained process. The activity itself was the thing – a series of explorations and discoveries, a sequence of flashing insights and breathless risks successfully negotiated. The resultant canvas was of historical interest only. It showed a final outcome, but failed to reveal the crucial stages along the way – like a photograph of a climber safely on a summit, giving no inkling of the hand-holds and perilous traverses that had led to that culmination.

When he first realized this, at that very moment, the image of Neilsen appeared in his field of vision. The great man nodded sagely. He seemed to be saying "Well done, Gregor – you have understood."

So he continued with the work. As painting followed painting, he knew that he was working out to its conclusion some inner logic of the vision (Neilsen's vision?). He sensed an inexorable progression in his analysis and investigation of colour harmonies. Each day's new discoveries led to a further, profounder perception.

Something deep within him told him that he was working towards an ultimate understanding of the visual world. A final statement.

He asked himself, why had not Neilsen himself made that statement? Why had he left it to others? Was it the illness that had prevented the final consummation of his quest? Had some physical or mental weakness

caused him to fall short? Was that why he had transmitted his genius in a mind-slice to others, who could carry on the quest to the ultimate fulfilment? Like a runner who, feeling his own breath fail within sight of the winning post, hands on the baton to a fresher, stronger contestant?

One day the image of Neilsen appeared before him with arms impassively folded. It was hard to read the expression on the master's face.

Was some message being communicated?

Gregor sat with brush poised, gazing at the scene before him.

But the scene, he now realized, was not to be interpreted as a scene any more. It had resolved itself into a glowing mosaic of pure colour. The objects before him no longer asserted a separate status: they were one with each other and with the background. He feasted his eyes on the delight that shone all around him. He saw lozenges of gold and purple. Veins of vibrant crimson and fierce orange. Runnels of acid green. Flashes and streaks of prismatic blue.

The structure of the universe, the gross particular objects which these colours were describing, had ceased to exist for him. Colour was the only statement, the only joy, the only truth, the only meaningful discourse. Colour was all, was infinity, eternity, the whole beyond which nothing.

He sat for an uncounted time, absorbed in these new-found perceptions.

Gazing deeper into the swimming sea of colour that surrounded him, he became yet more fully immersed. He saw that the play of colour was simply a vibration, a series of wavelengths. It was the quivering and chiming of a substrate that was itself colourless. The ultimate substance of the universe was transparent – devoid of colour as glass or clear water. But as it shivered and changed, it became many-hued as a rainbow.

The sea of vibration engulfed him. The world of colour, which was really colourless, of which he himself was part, in which his body and brain were plunged, was an immortal ever-shifting existence, beyond meaning and unmeaning.

Recovering a little from his abstraction, he watched his hand as it moved to put down the brush. The hand he saw did not belong to him. It did not belong to Neilsen. It was impersonal – the hand of an angel.

Everything was complete.

There was nothing whatsoever to add.

That was how they found him, still plunged in the vision, when the bailiff droids broke down his door.

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William Spencer, a veteran of John Carnell's 1960s NewWorlds and NewWritings in SF, has written three previous stories for Interzone: "Striptease" (issue 72), "The Tyranny of Numbers" (issue 79) and "The Crash Investigator" (issue 95). An interview with him appeared in our issue 79. He lives in Sussex.

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As the last survivors of the media apocalypse, readers of sf prose can be forgiven a morbid interest in the contortions of high-minded cinema to apologize for its own annihilation of the book. I'm not sure there's a UK equivalent, but the great shorthand for humane literary culture in Hollywood is *Moby Dick*. Either you've read it and can cite it at length, like that ultimate symbol of a benign and civilized future Jean-Luc Picard, or you catch yourself out by bluffing an allusion and then not recognizing a quote, like the representative of a benighted pre-Federation humanity he's trying to win around at a critical point of ***Star Trek: First Contact***. It's an awkward moment, given that the paradox of *Star Trek*'s achievement is the way its own success has contributed centrally to the displacement of the written word as the foundation not only of sf culture itself but of the liberal humanism the franchise so laudably seeks to promote. It's also, of course, a moment of outrageous pomposity of the kind we've come to expect and tolerate from the *Star Trek* movies – trumping even *The Undiscovered Country*'s Shakespearean doodlings by soliciting direct and wholly unironic comparison (Picard as Ahab, the Borg as the big white one) with America's greatest literary icon.

Nevertheless, *First Contact* is easily the freshest breath of air in 17 years of the *Star Trek* movie machine – not least because it finally lifts clear of the gruesome cast of geriatric TOSsers who systematically reduced the first six and a half instalments to a sustained adventure in excruciating camp self-deconstruction. The worst that can be said of the *TNG* cast – taking early control with Jonathan Frakes' assumption of the Number One role behind camera – is that some of them are frankly a bit dull. But in professionalism, charisma, and sheer ability to wring something out of nothing they still wipe all 24 decks with their forebears; and best of all, they show no interest whatever in subverting the sincerity of the series' vision of an ethically-advanced pangalactic humanism. For worse or (on the whole) better, Roddenberry's liberal mythology of the 24th century is the version that has won the battle to be the sf century's most influential conception of the future; and of all the *ST* movies, *First Contact* is the one that addresses that responsibility with the least embarrassment and irony.

Like all the *Star Trek* films, it's an introspective epic, obsessed with its own mythicality, and shuffling fragments of its constricted repertoire of plot possibilities into a self-reflexive allegory. With rather touching openness, *First Contact* is the one that's all about Gene Roddenberry, particularly in the light of recent revisionist scrutiny. For what's at stake in *First Contact* is the birth of the *ST* future itself, and the fork in the path of 21st-century history where one branch leads to a better and bigger world, and the other to darkness and despair and the end of humanity itself (for plot purposes reified as assimilation by the Borg, though it's interesting how uninterested the film is in showing us that future onscreen).

There are some refreshingly upfront discussions, of a kind scarcely imaginable in the earlier movies, between Picard and the sceptical 21st-century abductee about precisely what's entailed: not only global peace, but an end to capitalism and a whole new "evolved sensibility" (*sic*). Yet, crucially, this is a future that depends not on the collective will of the masses (precisely what's villainized in the Borg), but on the vision of one flawed, far from lovable man: warp-drive pioneer Zef Cochran, transparently figuring Roddenberry himself in his beleaguered attempts to get his historic vehicle off the ground. "You all look at me as though I'm some kind of saint or visionary," he grumbles as his rendezvous with destiny looms. "I don't think you're a saint," says the director, from the back seat; "but you do have a vision, and we're sitting in it." Luckily the crew of the *Enterprise* pitch in and help to launch their beloved pilot in defiance of the army of spiritless drones who seek to scupper it, and the rest is future history. The aliens land; faces glow with the light of close encounter; and a figure steps forth and uncovers his head to reveal, as the uplift music swells to a crescendo, he has *pointy ears*.

It's a commendable sign of its honourable intentions that *First Contact* shows a new affection and respect for the anorak audience. Notably more than its predecessors, it's a film that not only refuses to apologize for its own daftness, but takes few prisoners in its dense shorthand allusions



to 150 episodes of backstory. (I speak with proper humility here, as one who embarrassingly finds not just the various *ST* series but pretty much all TV sf post-*Thunderbirds* mysteriously unwatchable, even in cases like *TNG*, *B5*, and *X-Files* where I desperately want to love it. Some kind of malfunctioning attention-span chip.) Yet at the same time, and again in contrast to all seven precursors, it works reasonably well even for the non-initiate as an effective if undistinguished back-to-basics spacetime swashbuckler, with some memorable images of a kind not normally expected from *Trek* (particularly the opening sequence and the assembly of Alice Krige's body), and some unprecedentedly scary sequences of trying to creep inconspicuously through a crowd of Borg. There's possibly one too many homages to great sf-movie iconography – the *CE3K* finale is redeemed by its witty twist, but the earlier image of *Enterprise*-class frying pans buzzing the Borg deathstar is just silly.

Without the wink-wink camp of the Shatner movies, it's frankly not much of a laugh-fest, but that's no bad thing. Troi gets sloshed, Data does a bit of acting ("Perhaps you should deactivate your emotion chip," Picard suggests at one juncture), and "I am a Klingon," explains Worf impatiently to the abductee, in a tone that might say "Get the toilet-humour wisecracks out of the way now." It's hard to gauge from this outing alone just how much real mileage is left in the movie franchise. But the Borg are right: in the face of sf's own inevitable assimilation by the *Star Trek* hive consciousness, resistance is futile. "By assimilating other beings into our collective," their queen explains to a resisting Data, "we bring them closer to perfection." They just may, at that.

So completely has media sf assimilated the genre's popular status that only the most desperate saddoes would seek their fix from a printed text. "A *book?*" exclaims the director of ***Roald Dahl's Matilda*** to his precocious progeny, already labelled by her above-the-line patronym as not his child at all but her literary father's. "What would you want a book for? There's nothing you can get from a book that you can't get from television faster!" But this is indeed, amazingly, Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, translated to screen with a fidelity that would border on the barmy if it weren't so giddyingly good. Again and again, where compromise would have been expected and probably wouldn't have been noticed, Dahl's text has been followed to a fault. Despite the (highly effective) transplantation to American soil, the Dickensian nomenclature of Wormwoods and Bogtrotters is retained, Matilda's ghastly mother is still obsessed with bingo, and people call one another "nit" and "twit" as though they were the most streetsmart terms in the world. Unfashionably but indispensably, a narrating voice is retained (the director's own); and such touching-up of dialogue and additional invention as the Kazan-Swicord writing team allow themselves is scrupulously harmonious with the material. Some incidents have been tastefully replotted for the sake of economy and curve, and the proportions of the story have been reshaped around a new set piece in the middle; but the whole plot has a most unHollywoodly actless structure, and its cheerfully brutal comedy of a gifted child's triumph over domestic dysfunctionality and institutional abuse seems to have entirely evaded certification by the industry's thought police.

Nevertheless, some things have subtly changed, with interesting consequences and implications for the kind of Matilda that emerges. One is central, though one can hardly quibble with the result: Dahl's five-year-old psychokinetic *savante* is upgraded to six and a half, presumably to make it easier for her be played by the amazing Mara Wilson (who must be about ten?). More subtle, though, are the shifts in signification wrought by the film's American translocation, which considerably starkens the novel's troubling subtexts about class and its fierce contempt for TV-dinner culture. The literary Matilda's spivvy dad, a dealer in dodgy motors, is now a particularly lurid specimen of white trash with cash, and the spat with the very middle-class Miss Honey over the merits of a college education – more or less straight from the book – plays as a disturbing clash at a major faultline between worlds and cultures in American society. Particularly telltale here is that one of the film's few all-new episodes is one of those off-the-peg scenes, more or less obligatory in Hollywood attempts to chuckle away its unease about class, where grey-collar interlopers try nervously to pass muster in a swanky restaurant and end up making complete slapstick imbeciles of themselves.

Though unsettling, none of this does the material any real disservice, and if anything it makes it still tougher and darker. More disappointing, because one of the film's few real compromises, is the soft-pedalling approach to most of the book's random cartoon violence, requiring obtrusive reassurance after each such act that nobody's really hurt ("Poor kitty!" "Oh, he's all right," &c.). And stranger still to account for is a quality in the detail that can only be described as "lawyerly" – where Matilda's emphatic child's sense of absolute right and wrong in the novel translates on screen into a near-obsessive, and awfully LA, scrupulousness over legal niceties both federal and civil, culminating (though quite wittily) in her production at the end of a set of pre-xeroxed adoption papers all ready for her fugitive parents to sign.

But all this is tangential. The truly unique thing about *Matilda* is its unparalleled insistence on privileging the written word, from the title downwards, over any possible screen incarnation. Compared with wishy-washy tat of the "Hey kids! Books are *cool* – almost as much fun as movies, once you eliminate all difficulty and convert them into a 70-minute animated feature!" *Pagemaster* kind, *Matilda* is passionate to a fault about evangelizing seriously heavy reading. Remarkably, the screen Matilda's reading list goes even further than Dahl's in its concentration on the 19th century, bypassing Stevenson for Dickens and (inevitably, though he's not in the book) Melville. Much of this is achieved by setting up a dummy opposition between literary fiction and non-narrative television (in the book, it was soaps; in the film, this is tweaked to gameshows and wrestling to starken the polarity), with the meretricious implication that film, conspicuous by its absence from all this, is on the side of the former.

Well, it's an honourable attempt. But just as with *Star Trek*'s parallel claim to be on the side of the library users, the evidence on the ground points otherwards. After the film came out, I found myself in London's second-biggest bookshop hunting for Christmas books for my own one-year-old telekinete (at least, she has a spooky talent for vanishing small objects into hyperspace), and there was this display of Puffin *Matilda* titles: the book of the film, the book of the making of the film, the storybook, the puzzle book, and so on, but no sign of the actual Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. "Oh, we're out of that," said an assistant; then thought again, grubbed around on hands and knees, and finally produced a copy from deep at the back of a cavity beneath the lowest shelf. "Perhaps we should put some of these on display?" In the end, even *Matilda*'s own central protreptic to reading is a whopping sleight of truth. "You were born," says Miss Honey uncontroversially in an all-time winner of a line that speaks directly to the secret knowledge of every child in the world, "into a family that doesn't always appreciate you – but one day things are going to be very different." So what's the trick? Easy-peasy: read *Moby Dick* and you too will acquire telekinetic powers that will (in De Vito's rather actorly version) allow you to channel your pain into spectacular, messy, and untraceable revenge on the adult world that rejects you as an unlovely and incomprehensible geeklet. Hmm. Might be more honest to daub "Norwegians for Greenpeace" on your harpoon.

Nick Lowe

TUBE CORN

Wendy Bradley



Beams of wavering torchlight search a darkened room...

What am I describing? Obviously, ***The X-Files*** (BBC 1). Not only is this the most frequently seen image in the series, it is also the defining metaphor of the show's mythos. The search is for truth, the truth which is in the words of the opening title's slogan "out there," and the series is about the characters' attempts to find, illuminate, expose, explain or, in the case of some of them, hide that truth. But what do we mean by "truth" and what will we do with it when we find it? What are we trying to tell ourselves about ourselves by the popularity of this programme?

First and most obviously we are telling ourselves that we don't trust those in authority over us. A combination of millennium fever and political sleaze makes that a particularly resonant idea at this point in the century, and it finds its natural home in the continuing plot-thread of alien landings and some elements of government conspiring to experiment on their own citizens. Actually, one other piece of mythology fed by the show is that, whilst you and I are obviously too cool to run around like Dan Aykroyd in *Sneakers* muttering about the grassy knoll and how the government trades alien technology for cow-lips, nevertheless somewhere there really are people like that, real-life conspiracy-theorist weirdos who are, like the truth, somewhere "out there."

Well, have you ever met one? Or met anyone who reliably could report having met one? I am beginning to think the existence of the "wild-eyed conspiracy theorist" is in itself an urban myth, like the stories that there are people who send flowers to soap-opera funerals. Evidence please. The idea that there is a worldwide conspiracy which can produce troops and functionaries at the drop of a hat to destroy evidence, kill witnesses and bundle Mulder and Scully out of the room at the crucial moment is one of those givens that makes you, like Captain Kirk confronted by God, want to go "er – excuse me?"

What are we telling ourselves: all governments are malevolent and incompetent in equal measure? I find this plot-thread alternately enthralling and enraging: the moment you saw the Cigarette-Smoking Man with Mulder's father was one of the most chilling TV images I recall. But then after Mulder's father had been killed off the obvious question – why don't the conspirators simply put a bullet through Mulder's head rather than trying to conceal the truth from him? – becomes increasingly mirth-inducing. At the end of series two the conspirators chuck an incendiary bomb into the railway carriage where Mulder is trapped yet he escapes by the "with one bound he was free" method at the start of series three.

A few weeks later there are aliens using diesel oil to pass from body to body and conspiracy henchmen bundling Mulder and Scully out of the way of yet another piece of conclusive evidence – but does the Smoking Man take the opportunity to finish the job and put them both out of his misery? No way – or no series.

Well, actually, if the plotline *did* put a bullet through Mulder and Scully, would that necessarily be the end of *The X-Files* as we know it? I'm not talking about a Bobby Ewing-steps-out-of-the-shower-and-nothing-in-the-last-season-was-real plot fix but more of a *Battlestar Galactica*-without-Starbuck plot progression. What makes *The X-Files The X-Files*? Imagine, for a moment, a series five in which an eager FBI graduate and his new partner move into the basement office which used to be the haunt of the late lamented Mulder and Scully and, whilst clearing out file-space for their new two-person weird-crime unit, come across Mulder's notes and Scully's laptop...

No, no, put aside your Duchovny/Anderson prejudices for the moment and think about the concept. Would it work? In other words, I ask again, what is the programme about? Is it about weird FBI cases or about these particular weird FBI characters? Obviously at the time of writing I have no way of knowing whether the current rumours that Anderson may leave the series because of pay inequality will have blown up into a real row, blown out in a puff of pay-bargaining or, by the time this reaches you, will have turned out to be baloney in the first place – but it makes you think.

There is no doubt that either Duchovny or Anderson *could* be replaced, either by recasting the same character (Becky in *Roseanne*), replacing the character with another (Jimmy Smits in *NYPD Blue*) or rearranging the mythos around the missing character (*Taggart*). The question is, would the show stand it? If you think the show is about weird FBI cases, then, yes, clearly it would and you should vote for your preference by pressing button A. The second alternative is to consider the show as being "about" Mulder, about his personal quest for his personal grail of truth, and if you adhere to that version then it is only Duchovny who is indispensable and any central-casting bimbo could be Scully II, in the way that *The Avengers* needed Steed and a girly sidekick but it didn't matter whether it was Mrs Peel or Purdy this week. If you think that's the case, then clearly it doesn't matter whether Ms Anderson gets equal pay for work of equal value because if she creates a fuss you can just pick another sidekick from the box and press button B. [Note: pressing button B produces a 20,000-volt shock. Hey, it's my poll and I'll rig it if I want to. I urge you, however, to consider button C.]

I would like to posit a third alternative, at button C, where we agree that the programme is also about the relationship between the two characters. I suggest that it is important that Scully and Mulder are equally

likely to be targeted by this week's maniac, equally likely to be kidnapee or heroic rescuer, equally capable of running down a lead or a bad guy. In fact one of the things I think the programme is "about" is how relationships work. In a world where the givens include all kinds of millennial weirdness, the constant of *The X-Files* is the equality of the relationship between Mulder and Scully. The usual gender stereotypes are playfully turned around to make him the impulsive intuitive and her the logical rational, although in a kind of catastrophe-theory inversion of these stereotypes it is of course Mulder's wild intuitive leaps which are always right and Scully's careful logic which is always wrong – hell, we girls really can't get a break.

But look at the way they interact. They are partners, and the partner is a sacred concept in the cop genre, a much more important relationship than mere marriage. Look at the way they dress. Have you any idea how hard it is for a woman to dress in a way that is *neutral* in the way that a man in a suit and tie is neutral? The male suit is camouflage, conformity, normality – yet Scully's appearance comes the closest I have seen in a woman to achieving that same neutrality. Look at the bones of the relationship. They have the kind of relationship – equal, trusting, supportive – which anti-feminist theory would have us believe is impossible between men and women.

In a way, one of the things I think the series is telling us about ourselves is that we're on the right track. In contrast with the tabloid world-view that says people should stay in their places, that we could get back to some cosy stable 1950s world of hierarchy, family, no smut on TV and no crime on the streets if only we could get rid of these single mothers/uppity foreigners/fill in this week's bogeyman of choice, what *The X-Files* tell us is that we can trust each other. OK, so the world has gone to hell in a handcart and is full of serial killers, aliens and mutants, but nevertheless we were right and men and women *can* work together to solve whatever problems the universe throws at us.

Too much freight for one little TV show to carry? Suit yourself; but I like it. I also think it's a positive force and maybe the BBC are being a little chicken-hearted in their handling of it. When it was "cult TV," on BBC 2, they weren't quite so worried but once it became a phenomenon and was moved to the "mainstream" BBC 1 channel to maximize the audience they seem to have lost their nerve. The irritating fluctuating time slot that means you can't just set your video for the same time each week and the equally irritating shuffling of episode order does, in fact, have a rationale beyond the BBC trying to wind us up. Concerned by the "darker tone" (their description) of series three and mindful of the child audience the series has acquired, the BBC say the shuffle was aimed at putting the episodes felt to be too "strong" for 9.30 into a 10.00 pm slot rather than (the other alternative) cutting.

I can see the BBC have to follow their own guidelines, and I agree that it is right that there should *be* guidelines: my problem is with who makes the guidelines and whether they reflect the views of the viewers as a whole or simply of the tabloid newspapers and the self-appointed moral guardian pressure groups. If you are offended by cuts in programmes, by the excision of strong language from films, by having your evening viewing edited down to a level children can watch, please remember that it's always worth ringing up to make your views known. Get the station number from directory enquiries and ask for the TV duty officer. Real opinions from real people are, like the truth, "out there": but how else will the BBC find them? The BBC say they will be showing *The X-Files* series four in the autumn, although Sky-watchers will see it sooner.

Wendy Bradley

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Terry Dowling

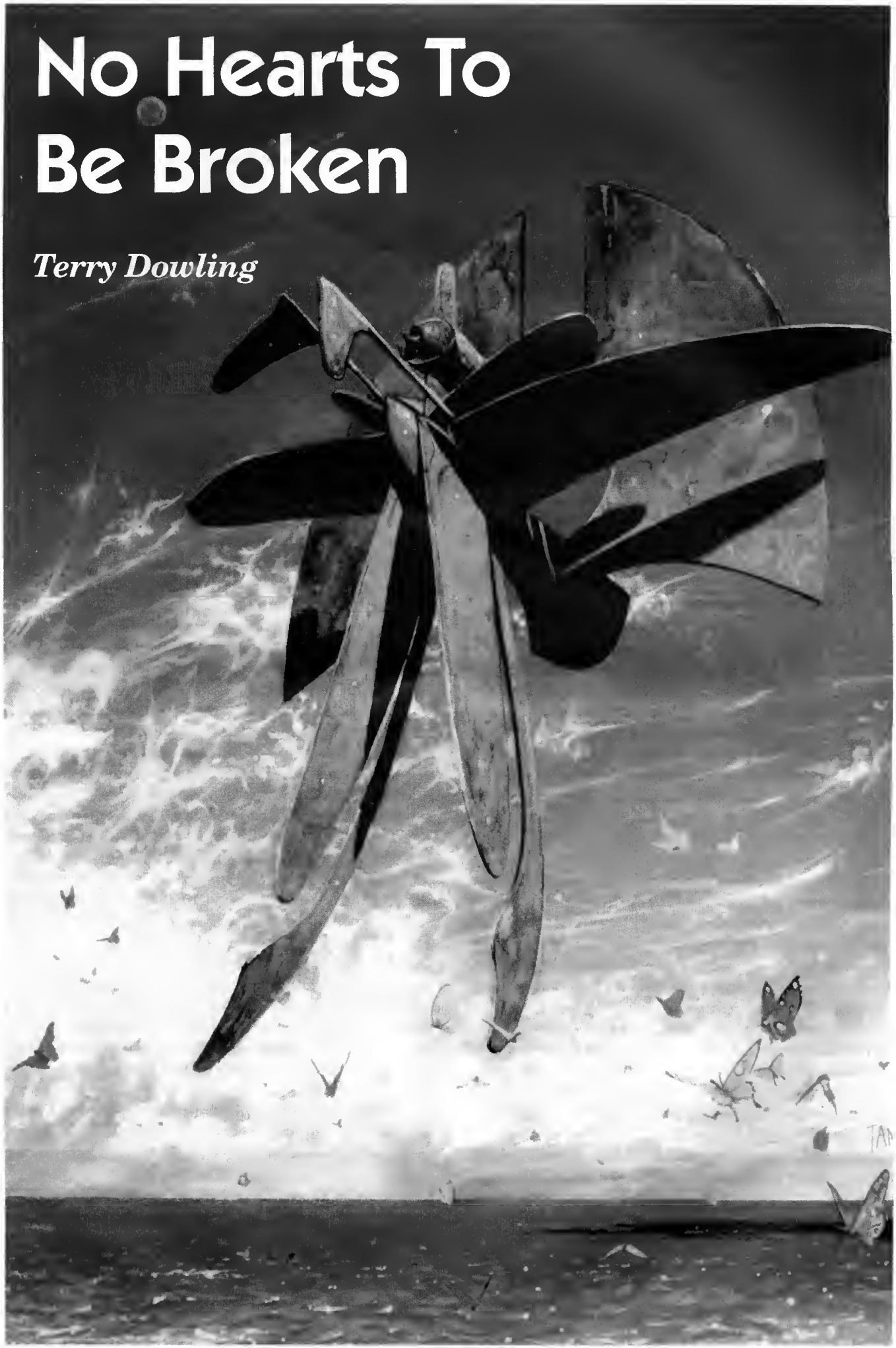


Illustration by Shaun Tan

On spring mornings, when the winds are mild and one of the old food mats passes close enough to the coast, sea butterflies fill the streets of Twilight Beach like so many flecks of light, as if some vast Neo-Impressionist painting has fragmented on the warm air, bits of Seurat and Signac streaming off after inconceivable resolutions, seeking some new target for their pointillist dreams.

I saw them first in their ones and twos, then dozens and thousands as I reached the terrace of the Gaza Hotel. John Wren did butterflies with his hands, fluttering them over his head, grinning with delight.

"So many!" he cried.

"Which island is it?" I said, joining him, shading my eyes and looking out.

"Are you blind, man? There's two! Tourmaline and Peridot. Two of the biggest. Their governors brought them in before they sensed each other and warded off. Now they're holding formation. Probably won't move on till late afternoon, maybe tomorrow, who knows?"

I was still shading my eyes, peering over the balustrade, trying to identify which of the long low sargassos was which. The living islands were wide green patches on the sea. Butterflies streamed in the light on-shore breeze between them.

"Do you know where their original name comes from, Tom?"

"What, cally?"

"No, their real name. Calenture."

"Calenture? I wasn't aware... No, I don't."

"It's the old name for the tropical delirium where sailors mistook the sea for green fields. It's perfectly justified. People called them callys at first but that's been pretty well dropped too. These days all you hear is seameadow, sargasso and island."

And another name, of course. Jewels of the sea. I looked out at the crusting of green – impossible fields standing on the ocean swells, butterflies streaming between.

"I though Peridot was lost," I said.

"That's just it!" John had his hands up again, clutching at the butterflies lifting over the terrace, streaming up the face of the hotel like so many frantic hinges of rice-paper and foil, velvet and bright enamel. "The governor did miscalculate a while back, took it too far south into bad currents. They lost three acres of driftwood substructure, lots of mat integrity. Weak spots everywhere. Four harvesters actually fell through."

"Who salvaged?"

"Who cares? Our lost island is viable again. We get these!" He fluttered his hands over his head. "It's a marvel!"

It was. We could count on a jewel, a cally, a seameadow drawing close sometime during the spring. Here were two; here were gardens and garlands, something unexpected and wonderful.

And more. As John and I and countless others watched, crowding the hotel terrace, the first aerotropt appeared over the whitewashed face of the Gaza Hotel.

"They're back!" someone cried as the mysterious construct drifted into view, totemic, strange, all rusted vanes and airfoils, like an untethered parafoil or a photonic kite gone rogue, seeking the exact line of the shore, for certainly the things never ventured out over water that we could tell.

The second one appeared moments later, working itself across the sky, a rusty cipher against the brilliant blue.

"You still think they're left over from Koronai?" John asked me.

"I do." Perhaps I wanted to believe it, was looking for some proof that these constructs had survived.

Koronai had ended nearly half a year before. The month-long end-of-summer, early-autumn festival that brought people down to Australia and to Twilight Beach in their thousands every year was a World Festival, bits of every celebration you could name – Carnevalle and Easter, Channukah and Ramadan, hints of Halloween and Samhain, clear traces of El Dia De Muerte and Obon, even the Anthesteria, the ancient Festival of the Pots.

It was also a Life Festival, and biotects from across the world brought their cognates and tangentals, their calibandros, teratomorphs and fabulous grotesques, hoping the tribal custodians might relent, sanction, give patents, subsidies, grudging approval for a stint in one of the life-houses, the wondrous improbability of tenure. Some came merely to display, to parody, to strut and thumb their noses, others hoping to release their denizens, set them free in the red deserts. Like these aerotropts, riding the breeze, tricking with the butterfly garlands.

Koronai ends with the Kolki, the Collector, the Red Hand, the demon wind that brings the desert to the coastal towns with stinging blood-red finality, traditionally ends with kites and flags, aerofoils and, sometimes, quasi-sentient constructs like these two now edging out over the Promenade. Heavier than air, each balanced on its helium nacelle and photonic lifts, managing, somehow managing to stay aloft.

"The Kolki would have knocked them from the sky," John said.

I could see the things annoyed him somehow, spoiled the wonder of the butterflies and the food islands. "Not if they hid."

John frowned. "What, if they knew enough to come down? Get in behind walls?"

"Why not, John?"

"You think they're smart enough?"

Which was an unusual choice of words, I thought. Why not *life* enough and allow a simple survival response as he did with the other Koronai constructs abandoned here?

He seemed to want me to share his view of them, for when I didn't answer he said, "They're not exactly pretty. It's like giving pigs wings." Which was his usual phrase for dismissing any of the Koronai aeroforms.

"They're beautiful," I said, watching how butterflies settled on the warm vanes and surfaces, sat resting, wings scissoring, before taking off again. "I do think they've probably been hiding. The butterflies must've brought them out."

It made sense, these half-life, quasi-sentient constructs responding to things of the sky. What didn't make sense was John's apparent hostility. He belonged to the Bird Club, one of Twilight Beach's renowned, more quirky institutions. Things of the sky, anything promising more birds, bird-equivalents, should have been important to him.

When I saw Sally Nightingale and Jeremy Eagleton on the terrace later that morning, they too remarked on John's reaction to the return of the aerotropts.

"We'll allow this one lapse," Sally said. "John's been

great for the Club – brave, clever, responsible for dozens of restruct species. That balloon rescue we did at Tyla was mostly his idea."

Jeremy set down his cup. "What Sally means, Tom, is that we also made the mistake of admiring the things. Why shouldn't we? They're quite wonderful."

I watched one of the constructs tracing the line of the Promenade, turning slowly back towards the town. "So there has to be something else. What about Koronai?"

"What about it?" Sally said.

"Months ago, just after they first appeared, I told John that I thought they were left over from Koronai. He brought it up this morning. Asked if I still thought they were."

"It doesn't matter, does it?" Jeremy said. "People release life experiments here all the time."

"I think he's only just seeing them as living things. Truly living."

"Which probably explains it," Sally said.

"I don't follow. Is there a problem with that?"

Jeremy gave one of the over-mannered gestures and headshakes that brought him and other members of the Club so much media attention – the affected Edwardian dandyism that typified this quaint mixture of 18th-century *Kaffee-klatsch* and martial arts *dojo*.

"For John, probably. He accepts all the earth-bound, sea-bound forms, but the skies must remain pure. Sacrosanct. He accepts true genetic restructs – any of the old DNA strains we can get up and going. He won't come out and say it, too much the gentleman I suppose, but he was furious when Anton used his Ank construct to gain membership. He and Anton might be good friends now, but even Anton doesn't mention his creation too often. John is a complicated man."

The complicated man was waiting at the end of the terrace when I left Sally and Jeremy, finally made my way through the crowds of tourists and townsfolk watching the butterfly islands and slowly moving aeroforms. He pretended to notice me only at the last moment, but I knew he had been waiting for me.

"Tom, I've been thinking of what you said about the things hiding. Where do you think they'd do that?" He was trying to sound off-handed but his gaze was too intent.

"Probably out in one of the corio districts."

"Tomb Street?"

"Not that far. Probably somewhere south of Old Town, I'd say. There are lots of empty villas out there, abandoned orchards, walled courtyards with plenty of sun."

"Sun-powered, I agree. Phototropism of some kind. We could try to find where."

"What, see where they come down?"

"Why not? It'd be interesting to know."

Why, John?, I wanted to ask, but didn't, allowed that he needed to hide his reasons for now, that asking him about them would probably just send him off alone. John Wren made so much of scorning any construct attempts at re-birding the skies that he dare not be seen as too enthusiastic.

"We'd have to wait for the afternoon," he said. "Track them on their return leg to wherever it is."

"What about the islands, John? What if they leave while we're out looking? You'd miss the last of your butterflies."

"The sea breeze will be too strong after 1500. The butterflies will be gone anyway. And the callys might be there tomorrow. Look at them. Their governors aren't sure what's happening. They're like feudal monarchs, Japanese warlords weighing advantage, chess masters contemplating a move. Will you come out and look with me, Tom?"

When had John Wren ever asked anything of me? "All right."

"Good. Meet me here at 1400."

It's always strange to go into the emptier, outer districts of Twilight Beach, to walk streets progressively more deserted, pass villas and *pensions*, galleries and hotels closed for the off-season. It's easy to forget we are a culled society, and that corio – sealing up the dead in their former homes – at first such a simple, appropriate thing, has exacted its price.

John and I set off at 1400, hurrying along the quiet, hot backstreets out to where the town faded to breezy lanes flanked by whitewashed walls and fruit orchards, infrequent villas. Any conversation was mainly about the Club and not the aerotropts at all, John going on about names, how a dog called a spaniel was ultimately named after the elephant, how an ancient bird called a canary was named after dogs – the Canary islands being called *Canaria Insula* or Isle of Dogs by the Romans, these islands in turn also being called the Fortunate Isles, most apt with Tourmaline and Peridot visiting our coast.

It was entertaining enough at first, but soon became obviously what it was – an attempt to fill the awkward silence between people who are easily friends in company but not first-choice companions. We were probably both relieved when the need to hurry made us save our words.

We'd gotten as far as Crowstairs Road when the aerotropts passed overhead, angling down to the land, moving together as if in kinship, though perhaps it was their destination that mattered and they were as wary of one another as John and I or the cally governors on the islands off the coast.

All around us were abandoned orchards, closed-up villas, many given over to corio and containing their comfit-sealed dead. The sunlight came at us low along a dusty lane flanked by limewashed walls, and John and I exchanged a glance, unreadable from him except for the exasperation there.

"We're not going to make it," he said.

"Perhaps tomorrow, John. We know where to start."

"Tomorrow? They might not come out. The islands may be gone."

With anyone else I'd probably have asked the real reason for this sudden determined interest, but John Wren was even more remote than Jeremy Eagleton.

My question fell away unspoken as the strange flying machines settled further along Crowstairs Road, burnishing, gilding on their edges, becoming silhouettes, dropping as antic ciphers across the lowering face of the sun till they disappeared altogether.

A breeze blew among the trees in the derelict orchards, fluttered the faded flags on the rooflines of nearby villas, lifted over the weathered, whitewashed walls to stir the dust in the empty road.

"I can see why they chose this," John said. "People don't come out here."

They chose. He was treating them more and more as

cognates. And he was right. Half the houses were given over to corio; the rest were for sale or derelict or simply unused for too many seasons. There'd once been an artists' and makens' colony somewhere along Crowstairs Road; perhaps traces of it remained. But apart from the sad flutter of flags, the dry rattle of branches, the dust blowing along the road, there was no sign of life but ourselves.

The islands were still there the next morning, the butterflies streaming in as if from the halves of a dissolving mirage. It was already becoming known as "the time the islands stayed" and "the time of the double islands." Tourmaline had repositioned itself slightly to seawards, as if preparing for departure, but the presence of Peridot so close, and its first priority the need to safeguard its ecosystem, had probably made it decide to use tidal action. Pundits were already speculating on a third day.

I half-expected John to be out on Crowstairs Road watching for the aerotropts to appear, but no. He was on the terrace with the butterflies again, less animated now, less exuberant than before the flying machines had intruded on the spectacle, but showing pleasure nonetheless. The butterfly garlands rippled over the terrace, shimmered up the face of the hotel; the tiny creatures decorated the heads and shoulders of the more patient patrons and spectators.

"Want to try again later?" he asked, as if finding the hiding place of the aerotropts were my idea and he was doing it all for me.

"All right. *If* they appear."

"Oh, they'll appear," John said, in a way that suggested he might know more about them than he let on.

I felt a suspicion growing. Were these John's bioforms? Had he laboured in secret, spurred on by Anton's example, produced these constructs for Koronai, thinking the Kolki would come and fling them from the sky, believing it *had*, then found he'd created better than he knew? The things had survived, endured, hidden, then emerged again like dear but troubling spectres at the feast, reminders of something he openly opposed but couldn't help flirting with. It seemed so obvious now. Certainly he would publicly denounce them – call them travesties, "pigs with wings," but while each aerotropt was an albatross hanging about his neck, they might also be something he was secretly proud of.

John pushed back his chair and stood. "You must excuse me, Tom. I have an appointment to check the cadastral database of the area. See which houses are marked for corio, which are occupied, untenanted and so on. Check if any biotects or life makens are listed out that way. We have to be ready. See you at 1330."

"At 1330. *If* they appear."

He gave a thin smile and glanced at the sky, at the sea butterflies streaming in. "Of course. See you then."

There was a belltree at the end of the Gaza terrace, a twelve-foot construct everyone called Pilot, and when John Wren had gone, I went over to it, stood looking up at the sensor spines, the diligent canister at the top of the shaft.

"You know about the aerotropts?" I asked it. "Those flying machines out along the shore yesterday?"

"Good machines," it said.

"Yes. True life?"

"True life, yes. Good life."

"Can you access the Koronai files? The life registrations?"

"I can try, State of Nation." What Pilot always called me, one of my official names among the Australian tribes. "Some of it."

"Can you tell me who registered the aerotropts?"

"Pay question for question."

"All right."

A minute was all it took.

"Confidential," the tree said.

"Were they a local registration? Can you tell me that much?"

"Local, yes. Definitely local. Or sponsored by a local. Though..."

"Certification elsewhere would still mean information in the files. Your question, Pilot?"

"You still eat life for energy? Plants and animals?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"Custom. Conditioning..."

"You drive out the life."

"What? Yes. Yes, we do."

"Then try to put it back."

"What? Oh, right." I smiled up at the weathered diligent. "Yes, we do. We try to. Most societies do now."

"It's good to have a sense of irony, isn't it, State of Nation?"

"Yes, Pilot. Some say it's what marks being truly human."

"Thank you," the belltree said, and went back to whatever it was the belltrees did apart from make us extremely careful.

We never kept our 1330 appointment. Certainly the aerotropts did appear again, easing out over the roofline of the Gaza around 1015, making for the line of the shore. I watched them hovering, moving slowly back and forth, tricking with the sea butterflies, as if watching, considering what it would take to cross the bright morning swells to Peridot or Tourmaline, as if calculating the risk, driven – yes – by some private calenture.

But at 1120 a call came in from Den. The Chitalice tribal representative was insisting on a meeting at 1400. As the only Coloured Captain in Twilight Beach, Den pleaded with me to be present. I left a message with both the *concierge* at the Gaza and Jenkin Farr, the Club Secretary, then made my way out to Den's villa for an afternoon of polite small-talk masking the usual provocations and demands for accountability. It was always wearying dealing with the Chitalice, a very formal and rigorous people, stalwartly anti-National, and I didn't get back to the Gaza until well after breaklight had ended and the aerotropts, butterflies and John Wren were nowhere to be seen.

The islands, however, were still there, picked out in fairy lights and watch beacons like glorious extensions of the Breaklight Pier and the town. Semaphore runs winked and rippled along their adjacent edges, a routine warning off that would continue all through the night like heat-lightning on the sea or antique guns firing.

The next morning, the islands were gone. John was on the terrace again when I got there, and, the opposite of his enthusiasm two days before, gentility and discipline restored, he smiled and made a single beckoning ges-

ture, nothing like his mad "butterflying."

"Over for another few months. Wasn't it wonderful?"

"It always is, John. Sorry about not making it yesterday."

"Couldn't find them, of course," he said before I could ask. "But it's all academic now anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't heard? Tom, they left with the islands. At first light this morning."

"They crossed water?"

"I was here. I just knew it was going to happen. There was so little wind. They came out at 0530, can you believe it? Cruised the line of the shore, suddenly just turned out. They did it."

"You actually saw them go?"

"I was sitting here. Others had to. It must have been a brave thing to do. That was what – almost a kilometre? Two?"

"But before sunrise?"

John nodded. "They must've known. Stored power, judged the time best for it. Maybe even conferred with the governors. They went off with the islands. Can you imagine?"

I could. Of course I could. And John seemed easier, relaxed. His albatross – both of them – had fallen away. He was free again. And, yes, he had just *known* something was going to happen. Of course he had. He had placed the tropism himself. Do not stay! Leave Twilight Beach! Calenture.

I smiled and ordered coffee for us, then watched the vast stretch of blue where the islands had been, for a moment touched with something of that sweet delirium myself, seeing improbable fields, rolling green, garlands linking us, shimmering and sublime.

I later wondered how I ever believed him, why I never thought to ask Pilot if it had seen the aerotropts go. Probably because he was John, because he'd once help save my life at Tyla.

It was not until the end of the following summer, with Koronai almost on us again, that I happened on Sally and Jeremy on the Gaza terrace, joined them for coffee and spicy rolls, sat watching the Pier and the sparkling ocean. There were no food islands on this morning, of course, but with glints and hints of colour at the corner of the eye – a flower nodding in the on-shore breeze, an awning stirring, a restruct gull wheeling in and out again – it wasn't hard to imagine sea butterflies crimping the warm air, flakes of Seurat and Signac left over from the spring.

With Koronai so near, I remarked on the constructs we would see, what aeroforms would set John and Anton back at their usual bickering, begin the round all over again (all the while secretly wondering what John might send up to defy the demon Kolki when it came).

Sally smiled. "We were joking about it earlier. Jenkin brought some documents over for signing. We're hoping his real-estate thing might keep his mind off that."

"Real-estate thing?"

"Sure," Sally said. "Jenkin mentioned it months ago. John certainly didn't. Apparently he was going on about a real-estate boom south of Old Town, even bought himself a villa out that way."

"Was this before or after the two islands were here?" Suddenly it was a crucial question.

"Why that's just it," Jeremy said. "It was *while* the callys were here. Not that he's used it, Jenkin says. None of the renovations were made, nothing."

"Whereabouts exactly?"

"You'd have to ask Jenkin. He'll be at his office."

The gate of 479 Crowstairs was locked and solid under the noon sun, but it was easy enough to scale the two-metre wall. The aerotropts were there, resting in the wide dusty expanse of a derelict orchard. No, not resting. Heavy chains crisscrossed their shapes, secured by spikes driven into the hard earth. I climbed over the wall, went to them.

The things were quite dead. Whatever strange sentience had sat within their diligents was long gone, their inarticulate yearnings, tropisms, imperatives, their fear of the ocean, their dreams of going with the islands, of being with the butterflies, were no more.

But it was *how* it had been done. Not just coming in at night, killing the diligents with a few well-placed hammer blows, driving out the life, not even rupturing the core nacelles, maiming and stranding them. He had restrained them, left them intact but imprisoned them away from the sky.

Punished them.

I climbed the wall again, stood in Crowstairs Road, wondering if they had felt anything like despair or whether it had been rudimentary consciousness at best, merely a clutch of tropisms.

John hadn't been a reluctant and guilty creator wishing his illegitimate children on their way, wishing them well, planting the delirium of calenture, hadn't even been a thwarted, vindictive one eliminating the personal embarrassment of what he had made. I had assumed too much, taken Pilot's "local" to complete something I had mistakenly perceived. *I'd* perceived. Just as John had – with envy, anger, the hopeless conviction that had led to this.

It was what Pilot had said. Irony. But bitter.

Standing in the quiet, in the terrible silence of more than corio, I found myself in one of those moments when you're suddenly sure of nothing. I wanted to strike out, call him to a duel, reveal everything to the media, insist on a resignation from the Club, his or mine.

But *local* Pilot had said. Someone in Twilight Beach had made those poor dead things so determined to survive, so desperate to be in the sky. And somewhere along Crowstairs Road there had once been an artists' or makens' colony. Who knew what was down there still? I set off to see what I could find.

Come the spring, there would be islands and butterflies again, and with luck pigs might just have wings and John would see two restruct engines lifting over the Gaza, daring the ocean, feeling terror, yes, but filled with even more desire, making their way home.

For Shaun Tan, after his painting "Sea Butterflies"

Terry Dowling, born 1947, is one of Australia's most respected sf authors. The above story is a new entry in his "Rynosseros" series, which includes such books as Blue Tyson (1992) and Twilight Beach (1993). He previously appeared in this magazine with the unconnected story "The Ichneumon and the Dormeuse" (issue 106).

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

A modest proposal for *Interzone* editor David Pringle: why not incorporate in the USA and file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy? Immense rewards beckon! The ailing Marvel Comics group recently did just this in order "to get $525 million in new capital" ... the only snag being that someone called Ron Perelman (who already owns over 80% of Marvel) vastly increases his control. H'mm, wait a minute: maybe Ron Perelman wouldn't like this column. Modest proposal duly withdrawn. I never did understand Big Business.

CONTINUED ON NEXT ROCK

Harlan Ellison, to general applause from sf fandom, has published material eagerly awaited for 25 years ... being part 5 of his fan-fiction serial *!Nissassa*, begun in Lee Hoffman's fanzine *Science Fiction Five-Yearly* in 1956 and dormant since 1971. (*SFFY* itself is now at issue 10, its relentless schedule still unbroken.)

Robert A. Heinlein's *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress* is to become a movie, and a contract has been signed; my impeccable but unattributable source adds, "How sweet of the NASA people to discover ice on the moon when they did!"

William Rushton (1937-1996), who died on 11 December, was another sad loss: a co-founder of *Private Eye*, a genially funny man, a funny writer and an excellent cartoonist. His chief contribution to sf was the extravagantly silly and self-illustrated alternate-world novel *W. G. Grace's Last Case, or, The War of the Worlds–Part Two* (1984).

Carl Sagan (1934-1996) died on 20 December aged 62. Genre readers will remember him not so much for his middle-of-the-road sf novel *Contact* as for his fascination with the possibilities of real alien life, his work on the nuclear winter hypothesis, and his dedicated efforts over the decades to promote SETI and public understanding of science (*Cosmos* being only the tip of the iceberg) while debunking exploitative pseudoscience... as in his powerfully argued 1996 book *The Demon-Haunted World*.

Whitley Strieber recently sent out a digitized image of an utterly bog-standard and clichéd "alien," hailing it as "the most authentic looking photograph of an apparent alien that I have ever seen. The reason that I feel this is that it seems to reveal anatomical structures around the black eye covers that I have observed but intentionally never reported anywhere." Gosh! Could someone be having him on? It makes no difference: "Whether this is a model or not, it is terribly authentic, so authentic that I believe that it can be used to acclimatize oneself to the actual grays, which is not easy to do [when] you wake up in the middle of the night with one of them peering into your face." Quite, quite. Characteristically, although the creator of the image is unknown and Strieber has absolutely no rights to it, he has "copyrighted it in the name of the Communion Foundation, and it is not for distribution without permission." But subsequently our hero issued a follow-up statement which makes everything much clearer: "My conclusion is that this is most likely an exceptionally well executed fake. It remains the most authentic alien image that I have ever seen."

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Marley's Chains. A spate of multiply copied net mail urges us to contact Houghton Mifflin Co, who promised one free Xmas book to hospitalized US kids for every 25 e-mails received. Futilely chasing this is a follow-up begging everyone to stop, since the 50,000 maximum was passed on 11 December and 2,000 books (plus 500 extra) duly donated...

Small Press Guide 1997. This 374pp perfect-bound book's subtitle *A Detailed Guide to Poetry & Small Press Magazines* indicates its priorities – poetry comes first – but various other areas are covered, including sf: *Ansible*, *BBR*, *Interzone*, etc. £7.99 from Writer's Bookshop, 7-11 Kensington High St, London, W8 5NP.

Publishers & Sinners. *Malcolm Edwards* is now apparently both the UK HarperCollinsTradeDivision supremo *and* deputy managing director, following (according to *Private Eye*) a mighty ego battle with HC rival Norman Proffit, who after various threatened (NP's) and actual (Malcolm's) resignations has mysteriously been granted "equal status" with the man sf fans remember as Le Petit Mal. Also, *Tim Holman* is now Editorial Director of Orbit.

Power of Awards. US paperback rights to Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* languished until the book's World Fantasy Award triumph ... whereupon a "spirited auction" began, and was won by Tor.

CAN of Worms. "The Cult Awareness Network has been forced into bankruptcy, due to 45 lawsuits filed by the Scientologists," writes US correspondent Steve Brown. "A judge went for one of them and entered a $1.8 million judgement against the CAN. The CAN's assets were put up for auction. Their name, logo, PO Box and phone number – their identity – were sold to the highest bidder, who turned out to be a Scientologist. He intends to keep the organization going, but utilizing it for his own purposes. Thus, people who find CAN's 20-year-old phone number and call, worried about a son who just became a Hubbardite, will be talking to a Scientologist.... CAN said that throughout their career, 'aside from Satanic groups, more callers asked about Scientology than any other group.' There's more: pending is a sale of 600 feet of files on cults accumulated over the years. The Church of Sci wants these bad. Not only to finger people who have blown the whistle on their own activities, but to get dirt on rival cults. 'Scientology will pay anything to get their hands on those files,' said Robert Young, a former Scientologist spokesman who quit and became a major critic, 'We always figured CAN was the nexus for all the rest of the problems Scientology had. So the idea of getting the files is similar to the KGB being able to buy the files of the CIA.' A judge is thinking this over right now."

Thog's Masterclass. *Cultural Research Special Credit:* "Walter was in the kitchen, his elbows plunged into soapy water, singing along with Radio 1 as he worked, an opera program." (Kelly Link, "Flying Lessons," *Asimov's*) ... "Waldhari could feel his heart clenching and loosening like a fist in his chest, its drumbeat battering hard and slow against his ears." "Each step, each whisper of his soles against the stone floor seemed to echo within his skull, murmuring again the thought that had chafed at him since the first day he had looked into a silver Roman mirror and seen the sharp angles of his face, the harsh mask that would not show any of the thoughts that raged within his small ribs." "Gundahari and Gundrun shouted their thoughts with their faces." (all Stephan Grundy, *Attila's Treasure*, 1996)

The Trauma Jockey

David Hutchinson

I felt vaguely sad as I left the office. Locking up, I thought of the old lady lying in the hospital, tubes running into each arm and looping off into machines on either side of the bed. The thought, the sadness and the underlying guilt weren't terrible, certainly not unbearable, and that made me sad on my own account.

That thought took me about as far as the foyer of the building. I had Lucy Smith's money in my pocket, and I felt like a million dollars. I actually only had 300 euros in my pocket, but I had the guilt of her mother's death in my head and the memory of Ms Smith's watercolour smile as she left the office.

Lucy Smith's money paid Mrs Aiolupo, my Samoan landlady. It bought two weeks' worth of food stamps from a teenager in a pub off Dean Street. It bought me my first packet of cigarettes in over a week. It bought a bottle of retsina. I wandered East without a thought in my head, barging against the pedestrian flow on Oxford Street. I bought a pair of cheap jeans in a squatter shop.

In the shop, I thought of her going home to her husband and kids in Hertfordshire. I didn't know what excuse she'd used to come into London. Maybe she'd told her husband it was lunch with an old schoolfriend. Maybe she'd said it was a shopping expedition. Maybe he thought she was going to meet a lover.

I thought of her going home, serene and calm, no guilt behind that delicate wounded smile now. I wondered if she would think about the man into whom she had downloaded all the shit in her head, but I already knew the answer to that one.

I took my purchases and the remains of Lucy Smith's money into the Penultimate Bar.

"Long time," Ron said when I reached the counter.

"Quite a while," I agreed.

"Ought to be ashamed of yourself," he said, and he howled with laughter, as if we didn't go through the same routine every time I came in. Still chuckling, he poured me a glass of Spiritus, then went off down the bar to serve someone else.

I took a deep breath and downed the spirit in one gulp. I sighed and turned to look at the clientele.

This being lunchtime, there were some businessmen with wine and bowls of Ron's chilli and their satellite decks arranged in front of them. Some students. A bunch of out-of-work actors who always seemed to be there. Several American tourists who had come looking for the Real London and were wondering if this was it, and if it was, why was it so seedy?

Ron came back along the bar and I bought another Spiritus. I thought about Lucy Smith's mother. Most people manage to cope with the trauma of losing a loved one, one way or another. At the very most, they might see a therapist or a grief counsellor. Ms Smith had decided it was just too much to live with. She had simply wanted to be rid of it.

I pondered that for a while. While I pondered, Theo came in and leaned against the bar beside me.

"On time, as ever," I said.

Theo and Ron eyed each other across the scarred bartop that Ron had rescued from a demolished Fleet Street pub. Theo was in his 60s; his dreadlocks looked like iron-grey coil springs cascading out from under his greasy beret. He was wearing an RAF surplus overcoat, an unravelling sweater and stained jeans. One of his sneakers was split across the toe. In one huge gnarled hand he was clutching a battered yellow and white Europa Foods carrier bag.

"I told you before," Ron said to him. "You're barred."

"Fuck off," Theo said quietly.

"It's okay," I told Ron. "It's my fault; I forgot. I asked Theo to meet me here. We're just leaving."

"He still owes me for the damage from the last time he was in here," said Ron without breaking eye contact with Theo.

"Fuck *off*," Theo whispered, leaning his considerable height towards Ron.

"Okay, okay," I said hurriedly to head off a punch-up. I peeled a 50 off Ms Smith's diminishing roll of euros and laid it on the counter. "Here, will this do?"

Ron looked at the note, then he picked it up between thumb and forefinger as if it was a dead leaf. When he turned to put it in the till I quickly ushered Theo out.

You could more or less categorize Theo's acquaintances by where they thought he came from. There were those who thought he had been an American serviceman in the Gulf and Bosnia. Others said he had been a brilliant academic until booze lost him his job.

Certainly he was an American, and certainly he had done some travelling, because his accent had been corroded by all the places he had lived in until it had become a kind of pan-European American accent that was hard to place, but as for the rest of the rumours... well, I was one of those acquaintances who didn't know what to believe.

He lived in a two-room flat in a block behind Holborn. The lift never worked and the stairwells stank of urine and were littered with scorched silver paper, squeezed-out lemon halves, discarded syringes, plastic bottles inexpertly converted into bongs, the other detritus of the career addict. The whole outside of the building, up as high as the fourth floor, was a solid block of graffiti. I was always rather impressed by that; it takes a really determined person to tag four floors up the side of a building.

In one of the rooms was a sofa-bed and a mismatched pair of armchairs, the fabric on their armrests worn through and disgorging bits of stuffing. There was also a wardrobe with only one door, and a rickety Welsh dresser supporting a six-inch black-and-white TV. In one corner was a tiny two-ring electric hotplate, three crusted saucepans, a dented kettle, and a stack of unopened tins.

The other room was lined with shelves, floor to ceiling, and into these Theo had inserted his book collection. The books were arranged in no particular order, some of them stuck in longways or the wrong way round. There was no obvious theme; you could walk around the room for hours trying to figure out what Theo's literary interests were. He spent a lot of his time cruising the second-hand bookshops, from the smart ones that sell Dickens first editions to the ones that do a sideline in porn mags, looking for titles that interested him.

Here were books on Vietnam crammed up beside old Penguin Classic Jane Austens. User manuals for long-obsolete word-processing software next to teach-yourself language books for languages I had never heard of. Thousands of them, in rows two and three deep along the walls and piled in tottery waist-high towers on the floor. The outside wall was full of damp, and the whole room smelled of mouldy paper. In some places the books were so swollen with damp it was impossible to get them off the shelf individually. You had to take them out in blocks and peel them apart to get the one you wanted.

While Theo put the kettle on the hotplate in the other room, I wandered along the shelves to see if he'd made any interesting finds lately, but it was impossible to tell; there were just too many.

Also here were an old armchair which matched neither of the two in the other room, an old dentist's couch Theo had scavenged from a skip on Harley Street, and the Bridge.

The Bridge sat on the floor between the couch and the armchair, a Phillips, nearly 20 years old, big and boxy and quaint, almost art-deco. I squatted down on my heels and ran a fingertip over its casing. There were smear marks on the shiny grey plastic, and one rounded corner had broken away, exposing a small cavity almost completely filled with gritty fluff. I dug the fluff out with the tip of my little finger and flicked it towards a corner of the room.

Theo came in with a chipped enamel mug in one hand. He held it out to me and said, "Two weeks this time."

"Three," I said, taking the mug but not drinking. I never did. Theo recycled his teabags.

He shook his head. "Still too soon." In his other hand was a short roll of drug-patches. He peeled four red squares off their backing and slapped them onto the side of his neck.

I knew what he meant. He'd seen this before with other clients. He'd done it himself. He had found the intervals between downloads growing shorter and shorter, until there was just too much shit to download and nobody would take it on any more. I knew he watched me and saw himself, old, pilled-up, good for only one thing.

"It's the nature of the beast, Theo old son," I said lightly.

He looked very sad. "You think you're so bloody clever," he said. "Tell me, if you're so bloody clever, why aren't you working the clinics? Why aren't you living in some smart house out in the country? Why are you still here, hoovering out the consciences of little people?"

I stared. I'd never heard him say so much in one go before.

"No," he said without waiting for an answer. "I'll tell you why. It's because you're not as bloody clever as you think you are, that's why. Nobody ever is." He blinked at me, walked over to the couch and picked up the contact bands that lay on it. He took off his beret and tossed it at the shelves, slipped one of the bands over his temples and plugged its braid of optical ribbon into the Bridge. "Fuck you," he told me, offering the other band. "Let's do this thing."

I wondered if the combined effects of the pills and the machine had finally caused him to snap, but he just lay down on the couch, folded his arms across his chest, and closed his eyes.

Still watching him, I put my contacts on, plugged them into the interface, sat in the chair, and laid the machine's keypad across my knees. I tapped in a sequence of commands, then I sat back and said the magic words.

"It's like this, Doctor..." And it all came up, a fortnight and a half's worth of shit. Lucy Smith and her mother; the bloke who'd come home from a dirty weekend with his secretary and found his wife in the bath

with her wrists slit; the little girl whose kitten had been run over; the NHS registrar who, out of pure despair for his patients' plight, had started to practice euthanasia... all of it straight out of my head, through the machine, and into Theo, the last link in the chain...

Technology spins off in odd directions, a patient once remarked after I'd finished explaining the Bridge to him. I could have added that history also spins off in odd directions. The end of the Cold War, depending on which rumours you believed, had spun Theo out of the US Army and into his graffiti-bedecked building. In much the same way, the collapse of the Soviet Union had spun off the Bridge.

Russians are steeped in centuries of Eastern European folklore; they'll believe in stuff that Westerners just laugh at. For decades they had been experimenting with discreet phenomena such as telepathy and telekinesis. Around the time that Gorbachev was arrested in the abortive August Coup, scientists in Petropavlovsk were trying to build a machine which read people's minds.

After the Fall, when the ex-Soviet Union calved itself into progressively smaller and smaller nation-states, it seemed they were determined to sell anything and everything to get hold of hard currency. Nuclear warheads and technicians started to turn up in the Middle East, bought with petrodollars. Biological warfare experts suddenly suffered an irresistible urge to work in China. And the Petropavlovsk device was offered to the Americans, probably because the Russians thought it was worthless anyway.

What they had built, instead of being a machine which read minds, was a machine that read emotional states.

I'd long ago started calling it "shit," but really all it was was the ordinary fears and angers and guilts and despairs that affect everybody everywhere. The machine reads them, transmits them to whoever is plugged into the receiver channel, then erases certain sites in the transmitter brain, at the same time as it is effecting neurochemical change in the receiver brain. I suppose it might have had some merit as a spying device, but by the time the first prototype had emerged from the lab in Petropavlovsk the Cold War was over and it had more value as a piece of merchandise.

The machine mitigates the emotions you receive, damps them down, makes them manageable, but after a while they start to build up and other peoples' nightmares start leaking into your own. So you go to another practitioner to do some downloading of your own, empty the vessel. And when he starts to get the shakes he goes to another practitioner. And so on, like the food chain in reverse, pouring the shit down until it reaches the bottom of the ladder, pours into good old Theo and others like him, so bombed out that their personalities are on the edge of fragmenting and the only way they can make any money at all is by accepting the fears and horrors of a thousand faceless strangers.

Good old Theo. Nobody for him to pour his shit into. Who would willingly accept that much accumulated trauma and despair and guilt? Good old Theo, who looked at me and saw his own face, ten, 15 years ago, when he thought *he* was so bloody clever too.

When I left, he was sleeping on the dentist's couch, twitching. Under their closed lids, his eyes were REMing about like bearings in a pinball machine. There are drugs which help, but I doubt if they carried Theo far enough down to escape the nightmares.

I turned him over on his side so he wouldn't choke, made him as comfortable as I could, threw a smelly old Army blanket over him, and let myself out, double-locking the door behind me. I posted the keys through the letter box along with four sheets of food stamps and the last of Lucy Smith's money.

At the bottom of the stairs I stopped and thought of Lucy Smith's mother, and nothing happened. I felt wonderful.

The office was cold in the winter and stuffy in the summer. When the dentist downstairs had a customer you could hear the suggestively fluctuating whine of his drill. I'd asked him a number of times to soundproof his ceiling, but it turned out that neither of us was making enough money to afford the work.

My afternoon had accounted for all the money I had left the office with, so I still didn't have enough to pay for soundproofing. When I got back I had to drink my retsina to the accompaniment of somebody getting their cavities noisily drilled until I fell asleep.

The entryphone woke me around quarter past six. I opened my eyes and focused on the little screen on the desk. The camera had been vandalized the previous week, and it was showing, from a slightly surrealistic angle, a man in his mid-30s wearing an expensive-looking suit.

I turned the sound on and said, "Yes?"

His head turned, looking for the source of the voice, until he was looking directly into the camera. He said, "I saw your advertisement in *Time Out*." His voice sounded educated, but the entryphone's microphone distorted it too much to be certain.

"It's a little late," I told him, checking my watch. "I was about to close the office. Could you –"

"I'm afraid this won't wait," he said. "I'm willing to pay cash."

I pushed the button that unlocked the door, thinking equally of retsina and soundproofing. "I'm on the fourth floor."

I didn't bother to get up and open the office door for him; it gave me a few seconds to hide the bottle, rub a bit of colour back into my cheeks, comb my hair and tidy my clothing before he reached the door and knocked.

When I called out for him to come in he entered the office as if he owned it. For someone who looked so unassuming, he walked as if he was master of all he surveyed. He had thinning brown hair parted on one side, brown eyes, and a small mouth. I got up out of my chair and came round the desk, hand out to shake his hand, but he veered off and went to the window, staring out through the net curtain before turning to me and smiling.

"I'd like to hire you," he said. "Or whatever it is you call it."

"Certainly," I said, lowering my hand. "It's 300 euros a session."

He smiled again and looked out of the window. "Of course," he said, half to himself.

"Payable in advance," I said, already thinking that something here was not quite right. I don't know how the clientele of the big private practices behave, but

most of my clients come in nervously, looking for some kind of peace. I wasn't used to somebody just coming in and taking over.

"And if you fail to give me satisfaction?" he asked.

"The machine never fails," I said, thinking, *satisfaction?*

He looked at me again. "It was a hypothetical question."

"Well," I said, walking over until I was close enough to smell his aftershave, "*hypothetically*, if you don't get *satisfaction*, you can go to the Association, to whom I pay a premium for indemnity insurance." Except I hadn't paid my premiums for a while. I grinned. "In practice, I'd give you your money back. Less ten percent for my time." And for a few moments we looked into each other's eyes.

He looked away, still smiling. "Yes," he said. "That does seem less... formal, doesn't it,"

I'd never had a client who smiled quite so much, and that alone should have told me something was wrong, but I was thinking about the prospect of earning 600 euros in just one day – leaving aside the fact that I had already spent half of it – and was starting to get a little giddy with the idea.

I went back to the desk and took one of my printed release forms out of the drawer. "First I have to ask you to read this and sign it, please," I said, handing him the form. "Home Office regulations."

He seemed to find the idea of Home Office regulations amusing. He seemed to find everything amusing. Not laugh-out-loud funny, but amusing enough to have a smile about. I started to wonder what in Christ's name was wrong with him.

He used my pen to sign the form. He didn't bother to read the attestation to the currency of my licence – a little white lie there; the application was in the post – or the warnings about possible side-effects. He handed the form back. "And now?"

I looked at the name on the form. "Usually I like to have a chat with my patients before the session, Mister Jones. I find it relaxes them."

"That won't be necessary," he said, looking across the office to the two side-by-side couches in the corner. He smiled at me again. "I don't have the time, you see."

I looked at the form once more. "Very well." I put it on the desk. "If you'd just like to hop up on the couch..."

When he was comfortable I fitted the contact band around his forehead and wheeled the Bridge out of its cupboard. It was ten years younger than Theo's machine, a cheap Polish bootleg of a Sony model that had been obsolete almost as soon as it left the factory, research had been advancing so fast in those days. It was streamlined and matte-black and didn't even have the saving grace of looking quaint like Theo's. Jones watched incuriously but attentively as I positioned the little trolley between the couches and started to plug up the interfaces.

"This is a Rybakov-Lyubimov Bridge," I said, going into the standard spiel as much to calm my own feelings of disquiet as to calm the patient. "In a crude sense, it amplifies and transmits emotional states. You're connected to the transmission channel, and in a moment I'll plug into the receiver." I switched on the power, unrolled the keypad, and started to calibrate the machine. He looked at me and wryly raised an eyebrow. I ploughed on regardless. "The machine sets up a feedback loop which will cause a tiny neurochemical change in your brain, disassociating the feelings you're worried about from their trigger. In effect, any grief or fear or guilt you have about a certain person, event or object will be erased."

He had been watching my fingers on the keypad. "It's very interesting."

"It's much more complex than that, of course."

He looked at the Bridge. "And your presence is necessary in this... circuit?"

Once, I'd kept up with the articles in *New Scientist* on the subject. These days, I didn't bother. Somebody might have found an explanation, but I didn't know. I said, "The Rybakov-Lyubimov Effect only occurs when another brain is included in the circuit." I tried a smile of my own, and it occurred to me that it wasn't a patch on his. "If I'm not listening, nothing happens."

"It sounds like a dangerous piece of equipment. All that knowledge recorded onto your brain."

"It's not quite like that. The memories and emotions are only accessible on a subconscious level. And the situation in this office is the same as in the confessional or your doctor's surgery. Absolute confidentiality." I laid the keypad on top of the machine and put the receiver band round my head. "There's nothing to be worried about." I climbed up on the other couch and settled myself down. "Just think about the thing that's bothering you. All right?"

He smiled again.

"Okay." I reached over and turned on the 30-second timer, put my neck on the couch's headrest and mentally started to count back. At 15 I said, "All right then, Mister Jones. What seems to be the problem?"

After he'd gone, I sat for a long time looking across the office at the little pile of money on my desk, unwilling to go over and pick it up and count it. I kept thinking of the way he'd swung his legs off the couch and smiled at me as he counted the notes out, how he'd left without a word.

Finally I checked the machine. All the interfaces seemed to be in order. I ran the Bridge's diagnostic program and got little green lights all the way down the list.

There had been nothing. No transference. No slow upwelling of feelings. Nothing.

Instead there had been the girl.

She was probably eight or ten, one of the filthy children you see making their way from carriage to carriage on the Underground, tugging passengers' sleeves and demanding money. Somewhere back in my hindbrain I could still smell the dirt on her clothes, the acrid hot stench of urine as she wet herself. I could still feel the cloth in my fingers as he tore her panties off. Most shameful of all, when I saw him force his penis into her I found I had an erection as well.

It had been pictures. The Bridge doesn't work like that. The patient tells you a story and later the emotions slot in. You don't get pictures.

I sat down at the desk and closed my eyes and the image of the razor kept sweeping back and forth across my mind, the way the light from the single grimy window caught its edge, the way it opened long red spurting mouths wherever it passed over her skin.

And there had been *nothing*. No guilt, no shame. Not even a fear of being caught. It had been like being con-

nected to a stone or a glacier. There was no emotion at all. It had all been like telling a sick story.

But I knew it wasn't a story. Somewhere out there, in an abandoned flat, she was still lying on her face on ripped lino, body laid open, one huge wound...

I jack-knifed forward and vomited into the waste-paper bin. Then I toppled out of the chair and passed out.

I didn't go back to the office for a couple of days. I wandered aimlessly around my flat, drinking cup after cup of coffee and listening to the bowel-loosening vibrations of crush from the squatters downstairs. Normally I would have gone down to complain, but instead I just paced through it.

Finally, red-eyed and twitchy, I did go back to check my mail. I knew I should have gone to the police right away, and the hell with the professional code of ethics, but by then it was already too late.

When I watched thriller shows, the ones where some ordinary citizen witnesses a murder or a robbery or something and, instead of going to the cops, goes on the run or tries to solve the crime themselves, I always thought, *why the hell don't they just call the police?*

Now I knew why. Pure indecision. There's a moment after which you think calling the police will reflect as badly on you as on the offender, and you spend that moment trying to decide what to do.

I'd wasted two days trying to decide what to do. I couldn't call the cops now; they'd want to know why I'd waited so long. I was *still* trying to work out what to do.

And while I was still trying to work out what to do, he came back.

He must have watched the office, waited for me to come back, and then buzzed one of the other offices in the building. The dentist's secretary, a hugely dim Hungarian boy with a sketchy grasp of English, had a tendency to let in anybody who looked in need of dental work, regardless of who they had come to visit. This had resulted on occasion in the building being invaded by rotten-mouthed vagrants who only wanted a safe place to doss down for the night.

I'd just intended to come in for the post, but I'd stayed in the hope that a patient might present themselves. I'd tried to sit and read a magazine but had found, when I'd read it from cover to cover, that I still had no idea what magazine it was. I put it on the desk, looked up, and he was standing in the doorway, smiling at me.

I bounced out of the chair, kicking the bin over, and backed into a corner, heart thudding. "Get out," I managed to say, almost inaudibly.

"Now what kind of professional welcome is that?" he asked easily, walking into the office.

"Get the hell out of here," I gasped with a little more force, but not much.

He sat down in the guest chair on the other side of the desk. "I hate surprises," he said. "So I tend to do a lot of research. You'd be amazed how much research a person can do about another person these days. For instance, I know where you live. I know how much money you have in the bank – and that is a really sad piece of information to have, believe me."

"Fuck off," I said from the corner.

He smiled at me. "I know where your mother lives. And your brother and his family. His wife just had another little girl, didn't she?"

"What do you want?" I asked, appalled.

He examined his fingers. "Just your professional services. That's all."

I shook my head. "I can't give you the help you need. There's nothing I can do for you."

"Ah," he looked sad. "I'm afraid that's not quite true. On the contrary, I think you might be just the right man for the job, so to speak."

"No," I said. "I'll call the police."

He looked around the office. He gave me a chiding look and said, "Haven't you called them yet?"

He knew. He understood the hesitation, the sense that the right moment to call the police had passed. I couldn't take my eyes off him. He walked across the office and perched himself on one of the couches.

"All you have to do is your job, and I'll pay you," he said. "Just like any other patient."

"You're not like any other patient."

He reached into his inside pocket and took out a wad of euro notes. Then, with his other hand, he reached into another pocket and took out a short, slightly-curving object. He flicked his wrist, and the light caught the flash of the razor's straight edge.

"Shall we begin?" he said.

This time, it was a little boy.

The Russians had dumped the Petropavlovsk project because what they produced was unable to read minds. It made you feel a little down, made the person on the other couch feel a little better. That was all. But with Jones the reverse was true. With Jones it was operating as its inventors had intended. He was showing me full sound and vision, but no emotion. The Russians had built a machine that read the minds of psychopaths.

I still had no idea why he had bothered coming to me, but I knew that if I refused to cooperate he would kill me, after killing my brother and his family. I debated making a run for it and telling my family to do the same, but there was no guarantee that we could all move fast enough to get away from him. I paced my flat at night, trying to think it through from all angles. I drank myself to sleep, woke up the next morning on the sofa with the television blaring cartoons.

On Wednesday, I got a clue.

Wednesday was two young Asian girls he'd picked up in Southall. He'd taken them to another of the rancid faceless tower blocks he used as a killing-ground, forced them to have sex with each other, then beheaded them one at a time. The images were stronger than anything he'd shown me before, and I knew how proud he was of this particular killing. When it was over, I found I'd wet myself.

I tried to cover my embarrassment by going over to the desk and sitting down, but he'd noticed already and his smile was wider than ever as he laid my money down in front of me before leaving.

He always paid. I never understood that.

When he was gone, I sat back and closed my eyes and the images of the two girls raged up again from somewhere in my subconscious. I gasped and opened my eyes again. My hands wouldn't stop shaking. I

jammed them under my thighs and they twitched like trapped birds.

This time... this time... this time...

I leaned forward in the chair, trying to reach for the ghost of impression I thought had accompanied his tales of murder. There was always a faint underlying wash of satisfaction, but it wasn't sexual satisfaction, or the satiation of blood lust. It was the satisfaction of a job well done. But this time there had been something more. I was sure...

...and there it was, almost too faint to be called a sensation at all.

He was *bored*...

I sat bolt upright. The killing was no longer enough for him. The experience of murder and depravity had actually become so familiar that it had begun to pall.

I found myself making the leaps of intuition. He had killed so much that it had become boring, so he had decided on something new, another game, one that involved torturing some innocent soul in quite another way.

And he wasn't going to stop. Because he was having the time of his life.

"You look like shit," said Derek.

"Fuck off."

"Sound like shit, too." He looked quite concerned, as well he might; I was fast becoming one of his best customers.

I put the envelope down on the newly-waxed tabletop, between his pint glass and my tumbler of Vladivar. "Are we going to do business, or are you going to examine me, doctor?"

He laughed, and the laugh disappeared as someone put a crush song on the jukebox and the lounge bar started to vibrate. I hated crush; it was played by machines, listened to by imbeciles, and had all the musical value of a sonic boom. The juke box was full of the stuff.

I leaned forward and shouted, "So how about it then?"

"In the bog!" he shouted back. "Second cubicle."

All the capital's pubs were Derek's place of business; it was like having an office building with all its rooms and floors in different parts of the city. He moved from one to another to no known plan, always one or two steps ahead of the Drugs Squad. His pockets were stuffed with London Transport travelcards, most of them forged. He was in his 40s, but his face had the calm unworn look of a child's, open and uncomplicated.

I got up and went to the toilet. Taped behind the cistern in the second cubicle was a little brown envelope. I took it down and opened it. Inside were six small yellow patches sealed in individual bubble-packs stamped with the Wellcome logo. I popped one pack open, stripped the backing off the patch and stuck it to the inside of my arm.

I was feeling much calmer when I went back into the pub. I looked over into the corner. Derek had gone, and so had my envelope.

The patches should have seen me through the week. I went through them in a day and a half. When the last one wore off I peeled it from my arm, rolled it into a little ball, and threw it into a corner of the room. Then I started to weep.

Normal sleep was impossible; I sat up all night watching moron television, watched the sun come up the next morning. I catnapped during the day, snapped suddenly awake from nightmares of knives and viscera. I was ready to go to the police. My family could take their own chances. But some small, still, vengeful voice told me it wasn't enough to have him arrested and locked up.

"You're starting to look ill," he said at one session.

"Bastard," I whispered from the couch. "Fucking bastard."

He leaned over and brushed my hair back off my forehead. I winced and tried to squirm away. "You're feverish. You should see a doctor."

"Leave me alone. Go away."

He shook his head and smiled as he took out his wallet. "No can do."

"I don't want your money." He seemed to get some kind of kick out of paying to torment me.

"That wouldn't be fair at all." He dropped the money on the desk and went out, smiling.

I lay where I was for a long time before I took the knife from my pocket and held it in front of my face. I had pictured myself driving it into his chest, and in the end I had just gone along with our little routine, obedient as ever. I put my head back and screamed at the ceiling.

"No," said Theo. "No way."

"Why not?"

He had sat and listened to the story without saying a word, not even to tell me I wasn't quite as bloody clever as I thought I was, until I'd told him what I wanted to do.

"You'll get yourself killed," he said.

"No I won't." I'd scored a little green patch from him; stuck under my ear, it was keeping me from bursting into tears.

"You should have gone to the cops," he told me. "Day one. Right away."

"Theo, I *know*, but I told –"

Ron came over to our table and said, "I told you he was barred," and we both looked up at him simultaneously. I don't know what he saw in our faces, but it was enough to send him back behind the bar without another word.

"You'll get yourself killed," Theo said again.

"It's the only way," I pressed. "I can't kill him. I daren't call the police. He'll just keep on coming until I go crazy. And he'll probably keep on coming after that."

He shook his head. "I won't let you."

"Fine. I'll just find someone else."

He stared at me. It was one of his good days, but he still looked a thousand years old.

"I know blokes who'd jump at this," I said. "And so do you."

He lit another of my cigarettes and regarded me steadily through the smoke. "Crazy boy."

"Not yet. Soon, maybe."

He took another drag, exhaled. "How much money have you got?"

"A lot." That was the only good thing about the whole situation. For Jones, paying me was part of the fun. I was starting to become mildly well-off.

"Do you have it here?"

I took from my pocket an envelope containing just over 1,000 euros. I put it on the table.

Theo put his hands down flat on the table on either side of the envelope. "I want you to sign a release."

"You what?"

"To cover my ass when you get yourself killed."

I laughed. At least I tried; it came out as a tiny hysterical gasp. *"Anything."*

He sighed and looked at me a moment longer. Then he picked up the envelope. "Okay. First we have to score."

Theo's connection was a 17-year-old girl with pomegranate-coloured hair and a brass curtain-ring through her nose. When Theo told her what we wanted she looked as if Christmas and her birthday had arrived together.

My arms under my shirtsleeves were covered in multicoloured dots, squares, triangles and hexagons. The waste bin was full of torn bubble packaging. I alternated between crushing depression and wild elation. I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to stand it.

I looked at my watch. I went for a little walk around the office. I sat down again and gave a great gulping sob, then a little lunatic giggle. I could smell my sweat; it stank of all the chemicals in my bloodstream. I closed my eyes and fancied I could see a hurricane beneath the lids.

There was a sound at the door and my eyes snapped open. He was standing in the open doorway, hands in pockets, his usual quizzical grin. He'd charmed the Hungarian boy in the dentist's into letting him in again.

I took a breath that didn't feel nearly deep enough and said, "How long is this going to go on?" I was certain that my voice emerged as a shriek.

If it did, he didn't seem to notice. "As long as I want." He was absolutely calm and relaxed.

I shook my head. "No more. I can't."

"I've been watching your brother and his family," he said easily. "Lovely little girls he has."

The big muscles in my thighs were leaping like salmon. "Why don't you just get it over with? You're going to kill me anyway."

He walked over to the couches and put on a show of thinking about it. "Well, if things go on the way they have been I don't see why we shouldn't put it off almost indefinitely, do you?"

I stood up slowly, hoping he'd take my unsteadiness for fear and fatigue.

"Why me?" I asked, plugging in the Bridge.

He'd watched me set up the machine so many times now that he gave the procedure no more than a cursory glance. He smiled. "Why not? Modern life is so random. So... chaotic, don't you think?"

I settled the contact band around his temples. "You fucking *cunt*."

"If you say so." He sighed comfortably, crossed his ankles, and clasped his hands across his stomach. "You are, after all, the doctor."

I put on my contacts, lay down on the other couch, and started the timer. I counted back. And at the last moment something made me say, "Leave me alone. Haven't you had enough?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Not yet."

"All right, then," I said.

Maybe it was something in my voice. Maybe it connected with something he'd noticed about my body language, because he sat bolt upright and made a grab for the machine. That was a mistake; he still had a moment or so to pull the contacts off his head. He might have managed it, too, but he flailed at the machine instead. The timer counted down to zero, the Bridge came on, and I felt a hurricane roar up out of the centre of my being and slam him flat out on his couch. Theo, waiting down in the foyer, said later that the whole of the Edgware Road must have heard the scream. It must have been me; Jones never got the chance to make a sound.

It was truly like being at the heart of an immense storm. It all howled out of me, the 15 or 20 years of shit that had been poured into Theo, all the grief and fear and sadness and anger of thousands of people, Theo's own personal horrors. It all howled up out of my head, through the machine, endless, poisoned, a gale, a tornado.

Jones's body bent upward like a bow, arching him almost entirely off the couch. His mouth strained impossibly open, as if it could never be wide enough to vent all the screams that were pouring into him.

Still it kept coming, everything that had been hidden in Theo's head and downloaded to me just an hour ago. Only the drugs had allowed me to keep it under control long enough to do what needed doing. Theo had had to live with it, day after day, night after night, for years.

I wondered if, in the last moments before his personality was bulldozed away, Jones had worked out that I had plugged myself into the transmitter channel and him into the receiver. If so, the knowledge had been erased along with the rest of his personality in the first fraction of a second, wiped out by the unvoiced screams of a thousand throats.

The relief was incredible, sexual, as the machine unburdened me. His hands were flapping back and forth, fingers spasming. The muscles in his neck stood out like the buttresses on a cathedral.

It began to slow, eventually. I felt the storm begin to subside. It was a strong wind, a breeze, a zephyr. Last, but certainly not least, I swear I felt, like the last whispering breath from Pandora's Box, the gentle sadness of Ms Lucy Smith that she hadn't been at her mother's bedside when she died.

I stood up and took off the contacts. The timer read zero minus 100; the whole thing had taken a little over a minute and a half. Jones was twisted on his couch like a thunderstruck tree, muscles locked in rigor. Tiny vessels had burst in his staring eyes, flooding them with blood.

His breathing was fast and shallow, his pulse weak and very quick. Pity. I'd hoped it would kill him outright, but maybe this was better.

I felt as if I was going to float up to the ceiling. I rolled up my sleeves and started stripping the drug patches off my arms. I slapped on two big pink downers and put my jacket on and left the office, locking the door behind me.

Theo was waiting in the foyer. He was still wearing his dirty old clothes, but he looked 20 years younger, as if his own unburdening had erased half the lines on his face.

"Well?" he asked.

"All done."

"We should have done it my way."

Theo had wanted to install his Bridge in the office above mine, run an optical line down to my Bridge and link himself directly to Jones, but I knew it would never have worked. Jones had seen the office too often. He would have noticed the new wiring; any change like that would have made him suspicious. I'd been taking a real chance just swapping the input-output jacks over.

"It worked," I said. "Let's not worry about it."

We went back upstairs and sat with Jones until it got dark, then we carried him down to the rear exit of the building. Theo had hired a car, and we laid Jones on the back seat and covered him with a blanket.

We drove up the Edgware Road, then west through Paddington and Bayswater. Theo finally pulled into a quiet side-street near Ladbroke Grove, and when I was sure nobody was looking I got Jones out of the car, sat him against a wall, and left him there.

"Now what?" Theo asked as we drove under the Westway and into North Kensington.

I had taken all identification off Jones before leaving him and I was leafing through his wallet. There were several credit cards, all in the name of S. Jones. The bastard hadn't even bothered to use a false name when he came to see me.

"That's it," I said. "All over. Nothing else to do. He's gone." He'd be found eventually, of course, but London is full of lunatics, drunks and homeless people. Even if he did survive to have treatment, I doubted very much whether it would give anyone a clue to what had happened to him. The trauma had just been too massive. S. Jones, whoever he was, had been swept away like somebody washed off a sea-wall by a tidal wave.

There was a substantial amount of cash in the wallet, too. Fifty or sixty thousand euros. I wondered who Jones had been, to have so much money and the time to kill so many. I wound down the passenger window and settled back in my seat.

"You okay?" Theo asked.

Far away, I thought I heard somebody screaming, but it must have been my imagination.

"Yes," I said.

David Hutchinson, born 1960, has never appeared in Interzone before, but he is the author of four collections of sf short stories written when he was in his late teens: Thumbprints (1978), Fools' Gold (1979), Tom Air (1980) and The Paradise Equation (1981). After many years away from the field, he resumed writing recently. He lives in London.

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James Blish

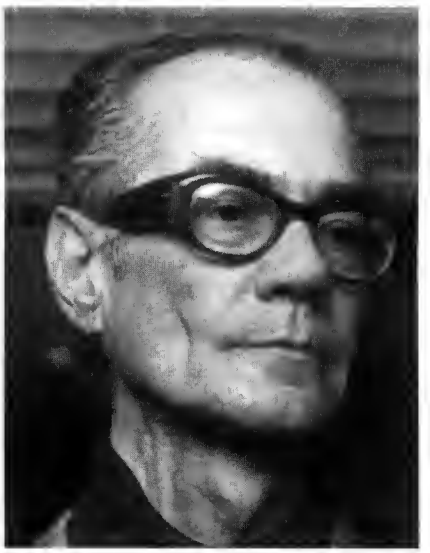
Brian Stableford

James Blish was part of the second generation of genre sf writers: the generation which came to prominence in the years following the end of World War II. Had it not been for the war it would not be so easy to speak in terms of distinct generations, but many would-be writers who might have spent the early 1940s making steady progress were interrupted by the draft; Blish was one of several who picked up the threads after a lapse of some years, the process of his maturation having been bottled up but by no means stalled in the meantime.

Like many of his fellows in the New York-based fan group who styled themselves the "Futurians" Blish placed a few amateurish stories in magazines edited by other members of the group (Donald A. Wollheim, Robert A. W. Lowndes and Frederik Pohl) during 1940-42 but then served as a medical laboratory technician in the Army. Although he was discharged from the Army after refusing to obey an order, and then became a conscientious objector, he took advantage of the GI Bill to return to graduate school. He studied zoology for a year and then switched to literature, completing a thesis on Ezra Pound that he never submitted for his MA.

It was during the latter phase of his postgraduate work that Blish resumed writing in earnest, producing poetry and criticism as well as stories which ranged over a wide spectrum of the pulp market – although the great bulk of them were bought by a single editor, Bob Lowndes. Blish and Lowndes shared an apartment for some time in 1945-6, during which time they wrote the sf novel *The Duplicated Man* in collaboration, although Lowndes did not get around to publishing it until 1953. The head start which Blish gained as an sf writer by virtue of his friendship with Lowndes was counterbalanced by a rift in the Futurian clan which set Blish and Don Wollheim at odds – a hostility which endured so long and cut so deep that Wollheim not only refused to publish Blish for nearly 30 years but remained reluctant to have any dealings with the literary agency run by Blish's first wife Virginia Kidd.

When he married Kidd in 1947 Blish was working part-time – alongside Damon Knight and other Futurians – for the Scott Meredith Agency "evaluating" stories sent in by neophyte writers who paid a fee for such criticism. The advice they gave out specified strict adherence to the Scott Meredith "plot skeleton" – which Blish allegedly extended from four elements to five by the addition of a penultimate crisis (although commonly-quoted versions of the formula usually stick to the original four: a sympathetic protagonist; an urgent problem; complications caused by initial failure to solve the problem; a solution by means of the protagonist's heroic efforts.)



His experience with the Meredith Agency helped Blish to cultivate a keen awareness of the mechanics of fiction, which became part and parcel of the critical dissections he was to carry out in reviews and essays published between 1952 and 1962, mostly under the pseudonym William Atheling, Jr. Many of these were collected in *The Issue at Hand* (1964), which became (and remains) one of the foundation-stones of science-fiction criticism.

When many of the pulps which Lowndes edited collapsed in 1948 Blish obtained steadier work editing trade journals in the pharmaceuticals and food-science field. With his spare time under pressure he restricted his writing to the sf field and began to produce work that was both adventurous and thoughtful.

Although he also found time to write scripts for the pioneering children's TV show *Captain Video* the early 1950s were to be a productive period whose extraordinary fruitfulness Blish never managed to recapture. The early stories in his "Cities in Flight" series appeared between 1950 and 1954. The two stories for which he is best remembered, "Surface Tension" and "A Case of Conscience," appeared in 1952 and 1953 – years which also saw the first appearance of "Beanstalk" and the enigmatic "Common Time." There is a sense in which his entire career grew from seeds planted in the first five years of the 1950s.

It was, of course, not unusual for writers of the period when magazines were gradually giving way to paperback books as the primary medium of popular fiction to make up manuscripts for book publication by expanding stories written to the tighter requirements of the pulps, as Blish did when converting the early ESP story "Let the Finder Beware!" (1949) into *Jack of Eagles* (1952). Nor was it unusual for writers to combine sets of shorter stories into episodic novels – the term "fix-up" had been coined by A. E. van Vogt, an inveterate reprocesser of this kind, although Raymond Chandler had earlier termed such clever melding of initially-distinct items "cannibalization." Where Blish was exceptional was that he was never content simply to inflate the wordage of his stories or to stitch up pre-existent materials into passable patchworks. His fascination with the ideas contained in his best stories was always strong enough, and thoughtful enough, to make him want to extend and extrapolate their implications.

The manner in which Blish extrapolated his most precious notions often followed a particular pattern, which might be characterized as "one step sideways, one step back and a big leap forward." The most straightforward example of the pattern can be seen in the way that "Surface Tension" became *The Seedling Stars* (1957). "Surface Tension" is itself an elaboration of the idea contained in the best of Blish's early stories, "Sunken Universe" (1942 as by Arthur Merlyn), which imagined human beings reduced to the same scale as micro-organisms, befriending paramecia and fighting off marauding rotifers. "Surface Ten-

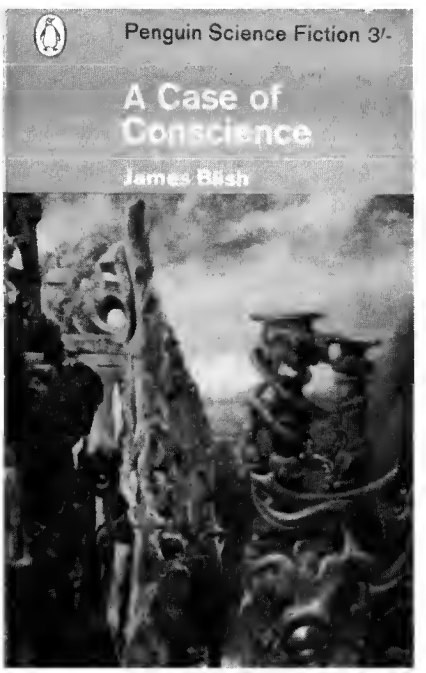
sion" provides a much more elaborate account of what such an existential situation might be like, with particular reference to the negligibility of gravity and the awesome power of surface tension – which becomes a barrier to be breached when the tiny humans must build a "space-ship" in which to move from their own stagnating puddle to a fresher one.

Blish always knew that the scientific basis of "Surface Tension" was weak, and that miniaturized humans were not really plausible; he was consequently surprised when the story was hailed as the best thing he had done. Typically, he immediately set out to see if he could repeat the success by producing a "copycat" story with an identical plot-structure: "The Thing in the Attic" (1954). It failed utterly to find the same favour with the readers, who found its account of humans adapted for life in a forest canopy far less engaging, but it did encourage Blish to elaborate a conceptual framework in which human beings could be functionally adapted – by what would now be called genetic engineering – for *any* kind of environment, however extreme.

Having established that framework, it seemed natural to him to perform two more exercises: one to explore the way in which such a grandiose project might have got off the ground and one which would take it to its logical conclusion. In this instance the last element, "Watershed" (1955) – in which the creatures adapted for life on a much-changed Earth are ferried to their new home by the "true" humans who are now adaptively fitted only to the artificial environments they have taken into space – was written before the first, "A Time to Survive." It must be noted, though, that had "A Time to Survive" been written before any of the others, its subsequent extrapolation would probably have been far less ambitious – as was the extrapolation of Blish's other tale of near-future genetic engineering, "Beanstalk," later expanded into *Titan's Daughter* (1961; that being the original publisher's rendition of Blish's *Titans' Daughter*). It was the attempt to support the ludicrously daring "Surface Tension" which required the extremism of what Blish termed "pantropy": the mission of human life to "change everything" and "go everywhere."

The fact that "Surface Tension" became established as a "classic" of sf probably has less to do with its plot structure – or, for that matter, its prophetic character – than its unusually bold celebration of what Peter Nicholls dubbed "the myth of conceptual breakthrough": the identification of a crucial historical moment at which a single discovery or endeavour brings about a dramatic and irrevocable shift in a whole society's conception of the universe. There is a certain irony, therefore, in the fact that *The Seedling Stars* – which grew hindwards out of "Surface Tension" – now warrants reappraisal as a pioneering extravaganza based in a kind of biotechnology which is in the process of actual development. "A Time to Survive" now looks far less exotic than it did in 1956 – but there is surely no higher compliment that one can offer a science-fiction writer than to observe that it was not until he had been dead for two decades that the magnitude of his achievement became clear.

A much more elaborate superstructure was eventually to be erected on the base provided by "Okie" (1950), a novelette that gained Blish entry to John W. Campbell, Jr's *Astounding* – a market which many of the Futurians found inhospitable. It looks forward to a day in which a technology of anti-gravity (the "spindizzy") has enabled the cities of an economically-depressed Earth to convert themselves into vast



spaceships, taking off into the galaxy in search of profitable employment. David Ketterer's excellent biography of Blish, *Imprisoned in a Tesseract* (1987) observes that "Okie" was preceded by an early draft of the story that was ultimately to become "Earthman, Come Home" (1953), and that it was Campbell's suggestion-laden rejection letter for that first story which provided the fuel for the early extrapolation of the series.

The immediate sequel to "Okie" was "Bindlestiff" (1950), which similarly appropriates an item of Depression slang. The novella "Sargasso of Lost Cities" (1953) and the revised "Earthman, Come Home" – which completed the fixed-up *Earthman, Come Home* (1955) expanded the "space operatic" aspects of the original stories by introducing ever-more grandiose contests between the cities. More importantly, they also introduced an element of historical repetition, as the 1930s-echoing depression which first forced the cities off earth is duplicated yet again on a galactic scale, forcing the cities to explore even further horizons.

Although science fiction was notionally committed to a "linear" theory of history – in which change, although inconstant, is always progressive – sf writers dabbling in future history had inevitably been tempted by the imaginative crutch of "recurrence" theories in which the future simply recapitulates the past on a larger scale. Isaac Asimov and A. E. van Vogt had plundered the history of the Roman Empire in constructing histories of the Galactic Empire to come, and the future histories elaborated by Robert A. Heinlein and Poul Anderson also drew heavily on historical analogies. Typically, Blish decided that if he were to do the same, then he would do it in earnest, making the very most of the scheme which he adopted: that laid out by Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West*.

By the time he got the Okie sequence back to square one in the revised version of "Earthman, Come Home" Blish had already written "Bridge" (1952), one of two novellas which were to make a near-future foundation-stone for the whole "Cities in Flight" series in *They Shall Have Stars* (1956). It was, however, the second – "At Death's End" (1954) – which really laid down the intellectual and philosophical groundwork for the whole enterprise.

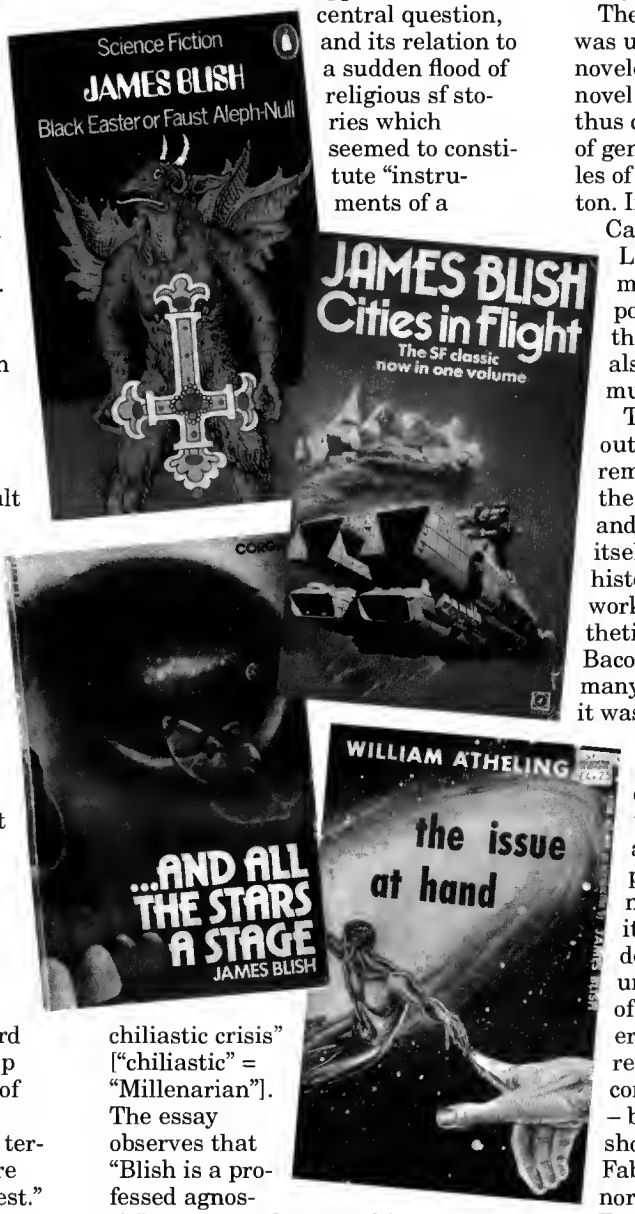
Blish was already committed to the cause of making genre sf more sophisticated in literary terms, in the hope that it might transcend the limitations imposed by the pulp ghetto and take its place as an important element of 20th-century literature. He had issued a manifesto to this effect in the critical essay published in 1952 which later became the first chapter of *The Issue at Hand*. "Bridge" had attempted such a sophistication in a relatively straightforward but nevertheless "scientized" manner, recruiting the supposed insights of psychological science to the minutely-detailed characterization of its troubled protagonist. "At Death's End" goes a step further, interweaving the characterization of the *dramatis personae* with the characterization of the recapitulative "historical moment" of the story.

In one sense, "At Death's End" plays the relatively modest role within "Cities in Flight" of introducing the "anti-agathic" drugs which will enable the inhabitants of the spacefaring cities to undertake very long journeys, but in clothing this simple motif in a multi-layered con-

text of significance it took science fiction to a level of intellectual sophistication which was at least one step beyond anything that Asimov or Heinlein had previously achieved or were ever to attempt.

They Shall Have Stars did not complete the work of establishing a base for *Earthman, Come Home*. The market for sf books was still very limited in the early 1950s. Although *Earthman, Come Home* had been issued in hardcover by Putnam in the US and Faber in the UK *They Shall Have Stars* could not repeat the double *coup*. Faber – who remained remarkably loyal to the select few sf writers they took on – issued it in Britain but in the US it went straight to paperback in an Avon edition which was unceremoniously cut and retitled *Year 2018!*. Putnam had apparently decided that as far as hardcover publication was concerned science fiction could only make money if it was aimed to juvenile readers. Blish therefore followed Heinlein's example by writing a number of juvenile novels alongside his adult novels, and the next book in the internal chronology of "Cities in Flight" (but the last to be written) was cast in this mould. This was *A Life for the Stars* (1962) which explained and described the exodus of the cities from the surface of the Earth. Ironically, the kind of explanatory material which Avon had rudely excised from *Year 2018!* on the grounds that it slowed down the plot proved more tolerable in a juvenile novel, because juvenile novels were expected to be didactic.

When Blish was still filling in the background to *Earthman, Come Home*, however, he had already carried the notion forward to its logical limit. Given the deep pessimism of Spengler's version of eternal recurrence, a futuristic extrapolation of it could have no terminus but one in which the entire galactic civilization would "go west." Blish had not yet started writing juveniles but there would have been no prospect of aiming such a story at that market; children's fiction makes ample room for the didactic but none at all for the apocalyptic. *A Triumph of Time* therefore followed the ill-fated *They Shall Have Stars* to Avon, with a text carefully designed to remain editorially unscathed; this time it was Faber who substituted a new title, but they were polite enough to let Blish choose his own (*A Clash of Cymbals*). Eight years passed before Avon began to make up for past derelictions by reissuing *They Shall Have Stars* under its original title; in 1970 they issued the whole series in an omnibus edition – but even that did not restore the entirety of Blish's preferred texts.



Shortly after publication of "A Case of Conscience" in 1953 the pseudonymous William Atheling, Jr wrote an essay called "Cathedrals in Space" about the various implications of the story: its situation in the problematic borderlands of the sf genre, its actionless but rhetorically scrupulous approach to its central question, and its relation to a sudden flood of religious sf stories which seemed to constitute "instruments of a chiliastic crisis" ["chiliastic" = "Millenarian"]. The essay observes that "Blish is a professed agnostic" but concludes that this cannot exempt him from the symptoms and concerns of a "chiliastic panic" allegedly afflicting contemporary society.

The plot of the novelette is simple. Human emissaries on Lithia must decide whether the planet is to be opened up to commercial exploitation – a question complicated by the presence of amiable indigenes whose Utopian society would inevitably be disrupted. One of the four, a Jesuit, places the question in a context very different from that of his fellows; he concludes that because the seemingly sinless aliens have no record of a saviour, and because their life-cycle makes it obvious that they are the product of evolution rather than Creation, they must be inventions of the Devil laid out as an ideological trap for mankind. As "Atheling" argued, however, the implications contained by the halo of doubt surrounding this simple proposition are potentially profound; following them through was to involve Blish in the most extravagant – and most extended – version of his customary pattern of analysis.

The sidestep part of the pattern was undertaken by expanding the novelette into the similarly-titled novel of 1958, which won a Hugo – thus confirming that the cutting edge of genre sf had shaken off the shackles of the Scott Meredith plot skeleton. In the new second part the Catholic hierarchy decide that if Lithia is the Devil's invention it must be exorcized, although the possibility is carefully left open that its abrupt destruction might also (or perhaps instead) have a mundane cause.

The backward step took Blish outside the sf genre altogether, removing the question of whether the search for secular knowledge and technological expertise might itself constitute a sin to its actual historical origins in the thought and work of Roger Bacon. Blish's hypothetical "spiritual biography" of Bacon, *Doctor Mirabilis* (1964), has many claims to being his best book – it was certainly his own favourite – but it defied the preconceptions of genre historical fiction as casually as it defied the expectations of Blish's ready-made audience and it did not find a publisher in the USA. Had Blish not been established with Faber it would probably have been deemed unpublishable, in the unfortunately-extensive tradition of stern warnings issued to writers of every stripe that they must respect the real and imaginary configurations of popular demand – but Faber stood by their man. (It should be noted, of course, that Faber no longer operates that way; nor does any other publisher in the English-speaking world.)

Having clarified the roots of his question Blish then took his customary leap forward, not to a far future, but to an imminent one – the proper locus for a minute analysis of contemporary "chiliastic panic." Unfortunately, Blish began to find the actual process of writing increasingly taxing after the mid-60s; his novels grew shorter and shorter and gave the impression of having been drawn out with the utmost difficulty. What he initially produced was only half of the concluding element of the sequence he would later term the "After Such Knowledge" trilogy: *Black Easter* (1968). This describes the build-up to the end of the world

imagined in terms of Miltonian Christianity, but ends with a brutally abrupt climactic twist revealing that God no longer rules the metempirical universe. Three years passed before *The Day After Judgment* (1971) completed the task by explaining what happened after the irreversible liberation of the forces of evil; no omnibus edition putting the two halves together was published until 1980.

"After Such Knowledge" remains Blish's most ambitious and most crucial contribution to the literary and philosophical sophistication of science fiction. It is an unashamedly esoteric work, which did not readily fit into the genre even at its inception, and which subsequently paid no attention at all to marketing categories and their boundaries. It was, in its way, a pioneering work which might have set a significant precedent for later endeavours, but in marketing terms it constituted a series of remarkable and probably unrepeatable flukes. Had "A Case of Conscience" not been part of a groundswell of interest in religious themes it might not have sold to the magazines or recommended itself as a safe bet for expansion. Had the British publishing establishment been Americanized a few years earlier *Doctor Mirabilis* would not have been published and the concluding diptych would almost certainly have remained unwritten.



It was not until 1969 that Blish was finally able – at the third attempt – to give up his day job and become a full-time writer. The recent publication of *Black Easter* was irrelevant to that achievement; his new financial security derived from the fact that he had contracted to produce story versions of the original *Star Trek* scripts, which appeared in a series of collections between 1967 and 1975. Blish also wrote the first original *Star Trek* novel, *Spock Must Die!* (1970). These were far more widely read than anything else he had produced, and remain the chief claim to such posthumous celebrity as he has contrived to retain.

Now that sf – insofar as it remains a mass-market genre – is TV-based and largely TV-standardized, Blish is fully entitled to be named as one of the significant pioneers and foundation-builders of the current state of affairs. Nor is it inapt that he attained this status because he regarded the relevant endeavours as elementary hack work required to buy time for worthwhile enterprises. The prospectus for sf sketched out in *The Issue at Hand* was remarkably prescient, although not quite in the way Blish imagined; sophisticated sf *is* now on the very brink of becoming part of the literary "mainstream," in the ironically unanticipated sense that what there is of it has to survive as esoteric material supported by academic study. Popular sf has, by contrast, abandoned every last vestige of its ambition to sophistication, accepting instead that TV is the one and only broker of fame and fortune in modern society.

Alas, the time Blish bought with his *Star Trek* adaptations was never spent. He could not recover the fluency of the early 1950s, and found it extremely difficult to write at all. He had undergone an operation for cancer of the tongue in 1964 but the cancer had already spread to his tonsils and it was to fight a nasty war of attrition for ten more years until it finally killed him. He fought back as best he could, but after *The Day After Judgment* he produced only one more work of substance: the awkwardly dense *Midsummer Century* (1972). He did try to expand yet another of his *contes philosophiques* from the early '50s, "Beep" (1954), into a novel, but he could contrive no more than a flaccid inflation to novella length in *The Quincunx of Time* (1973).

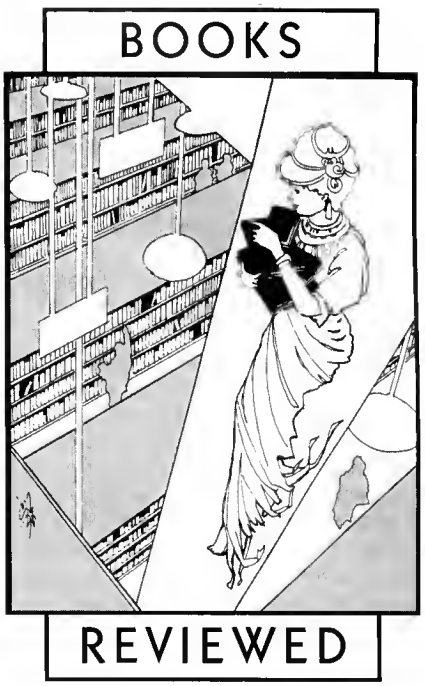
If Blish's other biotechnological explorations, *Titan's Daughter* and *A Torrent of Faces* (1967; written in collaboration with Norman L. Knight), are parcelled up with *The Seedling Stars* then it would not be unfair to say that he produced no novels of much interest outside his three major exercises in patterned analysis. *Fallen Star* (1957), also known as *The Frozen Year*, was an attempt to write a mainstream novel which eventually chickened out and lamely turned itself into sf. *Welcome to Mars!* (1967), also known as "The Hour Before Earthrise," is the second-best of his juveniles – but that only serves to emphasize what a sorry lot the rest of them are. Other novels based on pulpish magazine stories are as weak as might be expected – although *The Night Shapes* (1962), based on a novelette from *Jungle Stories*, exhibits a bizarre spirit of enterprise few others would have thought to attempt. Among Blish's shorter works, however, there are several worthy of further attention.

"There Shall Be No Darkness" (1950) is an interesting attempt at a rationalized supernatural story, providing a science-fictional "explanation" of vampirism and lycanthropy. "Art-Work" (1956), frequently reprinted as "A Work of Art," is a touching and thoughtful tale of the technological resurrection of composer Richard Strauss. "The Oath" (1960) is a neat moral conundrum of the kind which is often posed by advocates of moral pragmatism in order to expose the limitations of moral absolutism. Half a dozen more might be named, including "Common Time" – which became the basis of a classic exercise in psychoanalytic story-analysis by Damon Knight – and "Mistake Inside" (1948, initially as by Arthur Merlyn), which is subject to equally imaginative depth-plumbing analysis by David Ketterer. It would certainly not be true, however, to say that Blish shared with fellow Futurians Knight and Cyril Kornbluth a facility for excellent short work which he could not extrapolate to novel length.

Blish's true forte was not even the novel but the c*onstellation* of novels: a "constellation" meaning, in this coinage, a group which, although not necessarily linked into a trilogy or a tetralogy, illuminates a single theme from all the vital angles. Blish was not the first sf writer to work in this way, nor was he the last, but he was uniquely methodical and – in the best possible sense of the word – the most eccentric. It would be a great pity if there were to be no future market space for such remarkable and fruitful exercises in idiosyncrasy.

Brian Stableford

Note: *The excellent "working bibliography" of Blish recently issued by Galactic Central Publications – volume 46 in their series – is strongly recommended to interested readers; it costs £7 and may be ordered from 25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP.*



The Discipline of Hard SF

Chris Gilmore

Reviewing Alison Sinclair's first novel *Legacies* in *Interzone* 97, I noted a number of serious and avoidable defects of internal logic to set against her interesting characterization, effective use of sexual tension, imaginative scene-setting, etc. ***Blueheart*** (Millennium, £16.99), her second, shows many of the familiar virtues, and the discipline of a hard sf setting has made for a more plausible *mise en scène*.

She presumes an average human lifetime extended to about 200 years, with interstellar travel in ramscoop jets made endurable by suspended animation. Given these, colonization is practicable if not easy; most potential worlds need terraforming first, for which purpose a generation or three of modified humans must be bred. Once their task is completed, and "primaries" (relatively unmodified people) can live there, they are phased out, a fate which no modification has been able to withstand – so far.

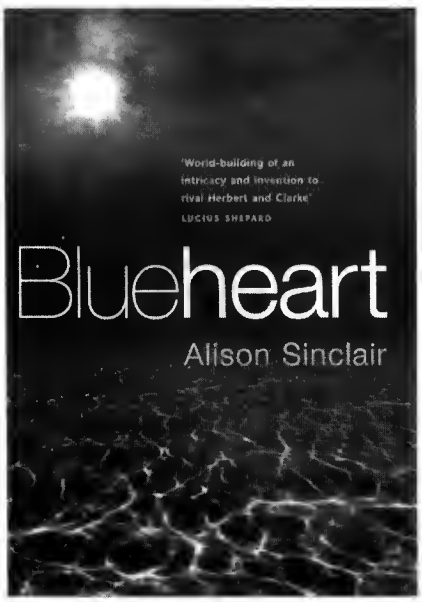
Blueheart is a water world, and the principal modification to its adaptives, that they can swim like Beowulf. They would like to see terraforming cancelled so as to carry on developing their own culture, an ambition viewed with alarm; it is seen as inevitably leading to speciation, which must entail the horrid risk of a war of extermination on interspecific lines. Almost as removed from primary mainstream thought are those religious types who regard both genetic modification and terraforming as blasphemous deviations from the Divine Plan.

Between these extremes lies Rache, a middle-aged, heavily modified adaptive who can see the danger and would like to negotiate a compromise if possible; but as such a compromise would neither immediately abort the terraforming nor allow for the elimination of the adaptives, he is distrusted by both parties. As the book opens it becomes apparent that clandestine extension of the modifications has been undertaken by persons in places unknown, and someone sets about sabotaging the local worldwide net – murderously, as it's linked to life-support systems in numerous underwater habitats. By a slightly strained coincidence, it's just then that Teal, an interstellar computer consultant, arrives on Blueheart, bringing with her complex links of blood and sentiment to most of the major characters.

With so much going on the principal plot becomes subordinated to the sub-plots at times, which creates, especially in the first half, a self-indulgent impression: with unseen conspirators threatening a whole world and a branch of the human race, one feels that grown-up people ought to be able to put the detritus from an unsatisfactory relationship with a father (deceased) or twin sister (likewise, but less recently) on hold. Sinclair obviously thinks otherwise, so that at times *Blueheart* reads like the offspring of a contemporary techno-thriller got on an Edwardian novel of sensibility. Among the minor male characters, especially, there are more hysterics than is credible. It's also a weakness that no details of the projected terraforming are provided.

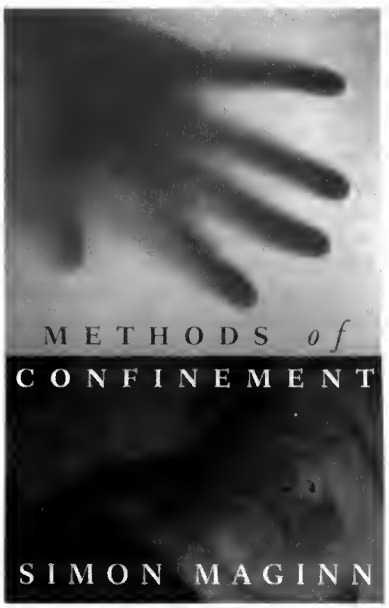
But once the full extent of the plot is uncovered the personal hang-ups become subordinated to a symbolic role in what is essentially a political novel on a traditional tragic theme: the conflict between those proponents of noble but incompatible ideals whose misfortune it is to have ties of love and blood with their opponents in a conflict that may escalate into total war. The worldwide net dominates the lives of the primaries, while the modifications which define the adaptive identity are virus-transmitted; physical viruses and computer viruses are both used as undercover weapons from the start, and ever more shamefully as lofty ends are sullied by base means.

After the longueurs in the first half, *Blueheart* emerges as a complex and highly satisfactory novel, and a great improvement on *Legacies*, despite Sinclair's rather insistent Garden-of-Eden symbolism and a tendency to overwork parallels. At this rate, her third should be a stunner.



Simon Maginn's ***Methods of Confinement*** (Black Swan, £6.99) is a variant on the theme of *The Man Who Came To Dinner*, and as such depends on believable characters and a steadily darkening atmosphere to obscure the fundamental implausibility of the premise. In this he succeeds well enough; he has a very fine eye for detail, especially clothes and interiors, and the cost (a rather somnolent narrative in the opening chapters) is not excessive. I was at first uncertain if his subtext was an attack on the Care in the Community programme... but to the plot.

The working life of Luke, a third-rate photographer and fourth-rate academic, is gainfully if uselessly devoted to the most meretricious forms of adult education; his leisure to booze, pot, sex and desultory work on a thoroughly naff fantasy novel.





Anna, his girlfriend, spends her days offering worthless "counselling" at the public expense to people who neither heed it nor would pay for it a red cent of their own. She has inherited a handsome house in a good suburb, and both would be content save that she is unable to conceive, despite many heroic sessions of IVF. But one evening Luke allows himself to be button-holed by Declan, an apparently harmless inadequate, and is soon chagrined to discover he and Anna have (messily, informally, but indissolubly) adopted him.

The story rapidly develops into a savage, and at times very funny, satire much in the style of Kingsley Amis, directed at one of the less notorious aspects of political correctness: the insistence that people with overt mental disorders should regard themselves as no less whole and "worthy" than those with none (though without forgoing the right to blame their condition and attendant misfortunes on everyone else). Since Declan's is a "passive-dependent personality" (his own words), he attempts to put that happy fiction into practice, despite having no idea of how to behave in any social context. After Luke and Anna have, predictably, rejected him he is incarcerated in a secure hospital, from which he is, predictably, released; it being in the nature of his condition that in a controlled environment he can pass for sane, and they need the bed.

Whither should he go? He has become fixated on Luke and Anna, so he re-attaches himself to them in the only way he can, by climbing into their home at night. There he reads Luke's developing (and increasingly violent) novel, which he adopts as a guide to his own social existence. Such a situation can hardly be stable, and its resolution qualifies the book as a horror novel, just about; the body-count is negligible by the standards of such comic writers as (say) Tom Sharpe. And who do you think was saved? Well, the moral is ineluctable: Never believe your own propaganda – and no more hints!

The "world where magic works" is a fantasy stand-by, and the magic comes in many flavours; the world where literary clichés are true has been essayed by L. Ron Hubbard; the world where Shakespeare is an historian and people soliloquize in blank verse, by Poul Anderson; the world where the *National Enquirer* is a journal of record, by Allan Rodgers; but Michael Marshall Smith's ***Spares*** (HarperCollins, £9.99) furnished my first encounter with the world of totally realized, undiluted bull.

The setting is the city of New Richmond, which occupies the site of former Richmond (Va.), former Richmond having been razed by its own inhabitants one day in protest at the dreary live entertainment and mediocre shopping opportunities to be found there. New Richmond itself began life as a 200-storey dirigible shopping mall of superior quality, which one day parked on the empty site with a spot of engine trouble and somehow never took off again. It is now much given over to vice, spice and strictly-cash transactions. Howie, a secondary character, made his first fortune organizing a visiting mugging service; people chat in the stylized, wise-cracking fashion of tough guys in comedy thrillers; the rich buy clothes which advertise how much they cost, and allow for depreciation arising from wear, damage and changing fashion; and so forth. All good fun but a fundamental breach of decorum, as the actual story is a matter of horror and pathos.

The "spares" of the title are literally that: identical clones of rich men's children, raised purely to serve as source material for transplant surgery as required. That idea goes back to T. J. Bass's *Half Past Human* at least, but as far as I know this the first time the human implications of such procedures have been explored in depth, and it makes grim reading.

The spares pass their lives in featureless tunnels, where they get enough food and medical attention to grow *pari passu* with their pampered originals, but receive nothing else whatever until Jack Randall, a junkie ex-cop and general deadbeat, lands a job as caretaker on one such "farm." Randall feels compassion for his charges and, with the help of a mysteriously motivated maintenance robot, sets about developing their human qualities and curing his addiction. As they have reached their mid-to-late teens without even learning speech he is implausibly successful in both endeavours, but I'm prepared to suspend disbelief; it's somewhat harder to suspend in respect of the frequency with which bits are taken from the spares – how many people do you know who have lost eyes, legs or hands to malice or accident before they were 20? Several, quite possibly; but as a proportion of your entire acquaintance? Low, I suspect and hope.

Randall's first-person narrative is written with passionate indignation, but in a curious way that rather increases the sense of unreality. After all, the technology is all in place yet such things are not being done (I think – they would be illegal anywhere); but we do know that, certainly until recently, children were being "adopted" wholesale from orphanages in eastern Europe to be used for precisely that purpose – except that as vital organs were involved, the "cut-and-come-again" aspect was absent. Were certain governments complaisant in this regard? That would be a matter for genuine shame and outrage. Moreover, he misses some opportunities for Grand Guignol ornamentation in the minutiae of their day-to-day existence: How, for instance, are the babies reared before they're old enough for the tunnels? How do they prevent terminally bored adolescents from getting each other pregnant?

Eventually Randall breaks out with a few of his more successfully rehabilitated spares and goes to earth in New Richmond where most of them get kidnapped – conveniently, as Randall finds himself involved perforce in a murder mystery, which leads into the book's third major aspect. Some two decades previously the government had discovered a way into an inhospitable meta-dimension known as the Gap. They had made a disastrous attempt to invade it (Randall being a young soldier at the time), but succumbed to the horror of the environment and the hostility of its inhabitants. (The parallel with Vietnam is too close to count as allegory.) Now it seems that to rescue the spares, prevent further murders and lay his personal demons, Randall must return there.

Spares is not a long book, and with so many strands the plot is a little crowded. I've no objection to that, and very few to the writing – Smith tends to use whom for who and I for me occasionally, but his ear is very fine, many of the jokes are original, the Gap is an intriguing concept, and he is excellent at conveying the darker emotions. Yet it's because of these virtues that I found the book grated on me at times.

It seems almost indecent to read a moving account of the systematic brutalization of innocence, then turn a few pages to find Randall talking to a computer that offers three choices of "versonality": an unkind parody of himself; Nerd (unavailable); or Bimbo (also unavailable, but understudied by Ex-Girlfriend). Like every other aspect it's very well done *per se*; Smith resolves all mysteries and ties up most loose ends in a conclusion whose sentimentality is almost welcome after all the grief, gore and bad-taste jokes that precede it – but it's also a bit like having to watch *Antigone* and *The Frogs* in alternate scenes; not the best way to sustain mood, however inspired the translations and imaginative the productions.

I can't see this book being entirely to anyone's taste, but I admired all the bits; if you enjoy none of them you're plain *picky*.

Having noted Alison Sinclair's progress, I wish I could say something similar of Adam Nichols, but his second novel, ***The Pathless Way*** (Orion, £16.99) is well below the standard of *The War of the Lords Veil*

(reviewed in *Interzone* 95). It shows early promise as a tale of "the man who learnt better," for as the book opens Guthrie Garthsson, the principal male viewpoint, is an anthology of all the least admirable qualities known to man, woman, beast and (especially) adolescent. Peevish, resentful, lazy, vain and (as the younger son of the local petty chieftain) much given to riding his hereditary pretensions roughshod over better men than himself and deflowering the daughters of the complaisant peasantry, he is obviously destined to proceed *per aspera ad astra*, and Nichols has what he evidently regards as a rocky road laid out.

Riverside, Guthrie's home, is sacked by quasi-Vikings; he escapes bearing the severed head of the Abbod of the local Closter, that title being the first of many gratuitous annoyances which encumber this book. It sounds enough like Abbot of the Cloister to make one look for its significance, but one does so in vain. Moreover, the Abbod was a wizard who could evidently have saved the day and his own life but for reasons never hinted at chose to do neither.

All looks fairly hopeless for Guthrie until he meets salvation in the form of Rosslyn, an old lady Closterer who offers him tuition in the Pathless Way of the title, which consists of watered-down Zen expressed through a collection of sorry doggerel verses of which I can only assume Nichols is improperly proud, since many are repeated several times. This one is typical:

One does more and more each day.
In the pursuit of knowing.
But follow the Pathless Way,
The goingless going,
And each day one does less,
Until one reaches fundamentalness.

It makes no more sense to Guthrie than it would to you or me, and he rebels. So what does Rosslyn do? She *gives* him all the powers of an adept, which include levitation, walking on water, swimming through dry land, telepathy and psychokinesis. Gosh!

Meanwhile Alia, a youthful huntress and the principal female viewpoint, has her own troubles. She has psychic powers which allow her occasionally to see the Fey (Earth spirits who, as it happens, play no part whatever in the story) and while seeking their attention attracts that of a gang of bandits who, not entirely by coincidence, are coming to Riverside just as the vikings are leaving. By courtesy of a bandit sorcerer who has his own plans for her she escapes their camp, having learned nothing of use.

There follow 200 pages wherein various parties blunder about in the woods. No one achieves anything of note, nor are they much given to witty or learned discourse. It appears to be a law of Nichols's universe that no one ever attempts to persuade anyone else by reasoned argument; Rosslyn talks in witless riddles, while all the rest attempt to overbear each other by personal or physical force, counter any questions with a bleak "You wouldn't understand," and if that fails shout "Fool!"

To be fair, the narrative picks up in the last hundred pages, and Guthrie even contrives to die with some dignity, though for a man with three fatal chest-wounds he manages an implausible amount of conversation *en passant*. All is lost, however, when Nichols *brings him back to life*, evidently judging him too fair to die, a judgement which I cannot conscientiously support.

Chris Gilmore

D-I-Y Subculture

Brian Stableford

When one of the leading business magazines did a feature on the publishing industry in 1995 it commissioned a cover picture of pigs in flight and headlined its piece: PROFITABLE PUBLISHING: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS? As the reading habit is in irretrievable decline among the young the mass market in books is being sustained (temporarily, one presumes) by the fact that older readers are living longer. It is, however, slightly surprising to be informed, year after year, by *The Bookseller* that the total number of titles issued continues inexorably to rise.

One reason for this remarkable statistic is that the lush literary undergrowth of small presses is flourishing as never before. The technologies of book-production have become cheaper and more compact as the computer revolution has unfolded and small presses can now operate with very low overheads indeed. This has resulted in a rapid proliferation of hobbyist publishing. Genres temporarily or permanently neglected by the mass market have been ardently colonized by such operations, and have found no difficulty in recruiting writers of considerable ability whose artistic ambitions outweigh – at least in the short term – their mercenary intent. Such titans of small-press fiction as Thomas Ligotti and D. F. Lewis are pioneers showing the way to a whole new generation of do-it-yourself careerists.

Following hot on the heels of the Buzzcity Press edition of his novella *Dradin in Love* (reviewed in *IZ* 116) comes Jeff VanderMeer's collection ***The Book of Lost Places*** (Dark Regions Press, PO Box 6301, Concord, CA 94524, USA; $8.95). It is actually the author's second collection, following *The Book of the Frog* (Ministry of Whimsy Press, 1989) – and overlaps the earlier collection very slightly in presenting the full-length version of the effervescently eccentric "Greensleeves," an extract from which closed the former book – but it is a far more mature work. Most of the stories in it first appeared in professional outlets, two of them in *Asimov's Science Fiction*. The stories explore a range of moods and styles, extending from quirky comedy through heartfelt sentimentality to stark tragedy, but even the lightest of them has a *conte cruel* edge which recognizes that the petty triumphs of love and ambition are won against the odds. On the other hand, even the cruellest of the *contes* – "The Emperor's Reply," about the revolutionary spirit of the original Tupac Amaru, and the magnificent "The Bone Carver's Tale," set in the killing-fields of Kampuchea – are possessed by a fervour which insists that the one thing which can thrive in spite of *all* evil circumstance is creativity.

Because it is easier than one might think to find material of high quality to publish, the principal problems facing contemporary hobbyist publishers are the ever-increasing costs of publicity and distribution. It is not enough for the small presses to publish books; they must also produce loci for the propagation of information about their exploits. The D-I-Y subculture of book production is, of course, mirrored by a D–I-Y subculture of music production; small independent labels producing tapes and CDs are proliferating rapidly, every bit as adept as small-press publishers at finding material of high quality which happens to fall outside the prevailing fascinations of the mass market. ***Asterism: The Journal of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Space Music*** (PO Box 6210, Evanston, IL 60204, USA; $2 per issue; $8 per year), edited by Jeff Berkwitz, thus provides an excellent example of an invaluable small-press locus of publicity.

Science fiction and fantasy have always had a slight influence on contemporary music and the fields have sometimes overlapped – Michael Moorcock has made various forays into rock in collaboration with such

bands as Blue Oyster Cult and Hawkwind, while recent debutant novelist Steve Palmer is also a performer of *avant garde* ambient music. It is only in the last few years, however, that the flow of influence has increased to such a flood that a publication like *Asterism* has become possible and necessary. Issue 5, dated Fall 1996, has 28 pages – twelve more than issue 4 – and further expansion seems likely. One new featured is an interview with Ellen Kushner about musical influences on her work, which will presumably be the first in a series; the second interview in this issue is with Richard Bone, linked to a review of his *Metaphysic Mambo* album.

The most surprising thing about the materials reviewed and advertised in *Asterism* is the extent to which the links between the music and the literary genres of sf and fantasy are independent of lyrics. The new technologies available to composers and performers have engendered wide interest in music which is somehow "science-fictional" in itself. We are informed that *Mysterious Motions of Memory* by John Flomer's Primal Cinema is a musical development of the theory "that memories are ... embedded in genes and passed down through generations," while Chris Snidow's *From the Foundation of the World* is said to "build upon the innovative work of the pioneering space musicians of the late seventies" in carrying forward a nascent musical genre. For those with less refined tastes the magazine does, of course, also provide coverage of such items as the definitive collection of theme tunes from Irwin Allen TV sf series and the second compilation of *Monster Movie Music*, which offers 68 precious minutes culled from *The Mole People*, *It Came from Beneath the Sea*, *The Monolith Monsters* and others of similar ilk.

We all know, of course, that for every book displayed in W. H. Smith's a hundred more are published, and that for every CD to be found in the Virgin Megastore a dozen more are pressed. Those of us whose tastes are relentlessly exoteric will not care about this, but the vast majority of sf readers were recruited to the genre because it was *different*, and it is a sad fact that those of us who wish to pursue that difference will have to pursue it into the realm of small presses, because there will soon be nothing left in the mass market but tie-ins to TV shows which are constrained by the same considerations of format and formula that apply to all other TV shows. Publications like *The Book of Lost Places*, outlets like Dark Regions Press and services like that provided by *Asterism* will become increasingly vital to the business of maintaining our idiosyncrasy, our individuality, and the very special joy that is to be obtained from being well-informed about matters of which the members of the common herd have never even heard.

Brian Stableford

Enjoyables

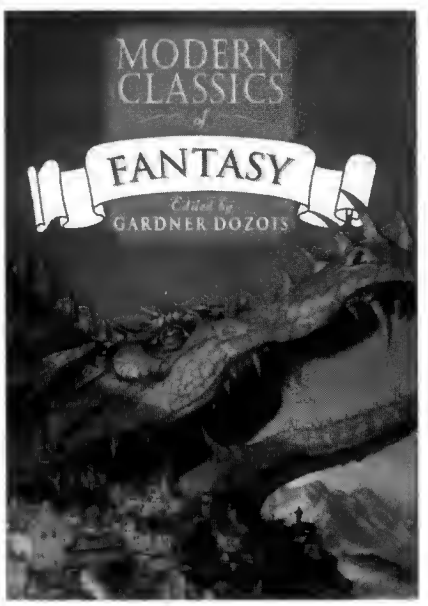
Ken Brown

I pulled off something of a coup the other month. Visiting the *Interzone* editorial offices (also known as Dave and Ann's house) after the regular Friday night meeting in the pub I managed to get away with four review copies of books that I expected would be nothing but fun to read. What follows is in no way objective – these are books that I wanted to read. I am biased in favour of them, and I enjoyed them all. If I seem to be nasty about any of them, it's just me praising with faint damns.

Infinity's Shore by David Brin (Bantam, $23.95) is the sequel to *Brightness Reef*. It is described on the cover as "Book Two of a new Uplift Trilogy," but it is really part of one long novel. There's no point in trying to describe the plot in detail – there really are more civilizations in this story than some novels have pages. The utopian, pluralistic, ideologically sound, deep-Green-with-a-big-G (you can only build houses in geologically unstable areas so that all trace of them will be wiped out within a few centuries) civilization of the Slope on Jijo, which was stunning in its bold silliness (tentacled hive-dwelling swamp-creatures to whom *The Cat in the Hat* is one of the triumphs of ancient literature) is being dismantled around the ears of the Five Races (actually six, or maybe even seven – like the Iroquois they lost count).

Galactic civilization has turned up again in the shape of a ship full of Rothen, who claim to be Earth's long-lost patrons, the species which fostered our ancestors into intelligence and provides our link to the Galactic chain of Uplift which is the organizing principle of all civilization. Almost nobody believes them, and the Five Races, who had been all set to collapse instantly on the their first renewal of contact with the outside universe, start looking around for a way to survive.

Alvin the Hoon, who is the nearest this exuberantly overpopulated novel has to a point-of-view character (Brin is one of the very few sf writers whose aliens seem more real than the humans), discovers that there are dolphins in the sea – the astute reader noticed this in the previous book, and anyone who has read Brin's other stuff will know who the dolphins are and why they are there. The Bad Guys, the Jophur, also find out, and the last quarter of *Infinity's Shore* is one long chase scene. As is traditional for a second act, nothing is resolved at the end.



This time round there is a map, which helps a little, a glossary, which doesn't help much, a Cast of Characters with over seventy names in it and a Cast of Sapient Species which doesn't help much at all. There are only ten species mentioned in it: the g'Kek, Traeki, Hoons, Urrs, Qheuens, Glavers, Humans, Rothen, Tytlal, Tymbrimi and Jophur. No detail at all of the Dolphins, Rewq, Kiqui, Buyur, Drooli, Noor, Guthatsa, Chimps, Zhosh, Oailie, Mulc Spiders, Poa, Lorniks, Zookirs, Puntictin, Soro, Tandu, Tunuctyur, Zang or the Old Ones; all of whom are important to the plot, even though they don't all appear on stage.

When I reviewed the first volume I wrote that Jijo reminded me a little of the Mars of C. S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*. It still does, but also has strong overtones of the Hundred-Acre Wood. I might also have compared it with the background to Tove Jansson's Moomin books, but they have an underlying spine of realism and character which is lacking here. You can have nightmares after reading a Moomin book, but I don't think that Jijo is likely to keep many children awake.

A long time ago, when the world was different than it is now, Bruce Sterling wrote that Brin's *Startide Rising* was one of the sf books your

mother wouldn't mind you reading. He didn't mean it as a compliment. This, which is in a sense a sequel to *Startide Rising*, is also a book your mother ought not to mind you reading, but I like it. Maybe I'm just a softer touch than Bruce Sterling. It is certainly a soft-hearted book. Despite space battles in the collapsium-plated class almost nobody gets seriously and permanently hurt, and none of the irrevocable dooms which were threatened in the first volume have yet come to pass.

Reading this novel is a bit like a visit to the zoo with a troop of Woodcraft Folk. You spend all your time rushing from one species or location or encounter or plot device to another without ever spending quite as much time with any of them as you might like. A lot of people are late for lunch, and there are tears before bedtime, but I think that somehow it will be All Right in the End.

Tom Holt's ***Paint Your Dragon*** (Orbit, £15.99) seems to me to be the least of the four books I'm reviewing here. I enjoyed it, I'm not sorry I read it and I imagine I will read his next one and his next one and enjoy them as well. But there is a sense of repetition. Readers (it is rumoured) like to enjoy the same type of book again and again. Bookshops (it is obvious) want to sell them the same book over and over again. So publishers (we suspect) try to get them written and authors (for good reasons, mostly to do with paying the rent) are forced to write them again and again. And this is what seems to be happening here as, just as in *Expecting Someone Taller* and almost everything else Holt has had published, an ordinary Englishperson's life is disrupted by some ancient mythical figure.

In this case the ordinary Englishperson is a young woman sculptor who is able to make statues that are so good that the disembodied spirits of the originals come and live in them. (I have an idea that Tom Holt rather fancies the women in his stories but would be too shy to tell them.) And the mythical figures are George and the Dragon and some genuine demons out of hell. The Dragon is handled well, George rather badly and the demons very badly indeed. Comic treatment of hell is rarely found in good books and Tom Holt seems to find it easier to keep control of his material the closer he stays to Wagner.

Paint Your Dragon is not a very bad book, nor is it a very good one.

Modern Classics of Fantasy edited by Gardner Dozois (St Martin's Press, $29.95) has "The Man who Painted the Dragon Griaule" by Lucius Shepard, and that is so much better. It also has over 30 other fantasy stories and, like other Dozois anthologies, an introduction which is a quick round-up of the whole field. This prologue is written in an unusual critical language; "eccentric" means good and "difficult to classify" seems to mean British or almost so (it is applied to Robert Holdstock, Keith Roberts, Mary Gentle, Gene Wolfe, Gwyneth Jones & M. John Harrison). There are a lot of "eccentric" stories in this collection.

The heart of the book are short stories written in what Gardner Dozois thinks of as the "ice age" of fantasy between the 1940s and the 1960s. first published in US magazines such as *Unknown*, *Weird Tales*, *Fantastic* and, of course, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, many of them occupy the borderlands between the two publishing categories. I imagine many *Interzone* readers will already have seen a lot of them. All are worth re-reading.



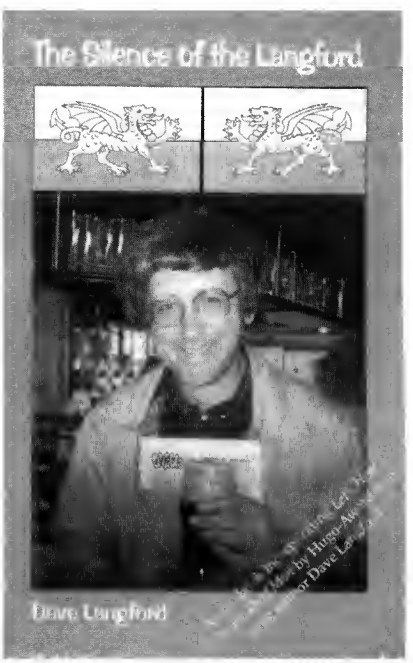
It is not easy to choose a few to mention here. We have Roger Zelazny's "Death And the Executioner," later expanded into the novel *Lord of Light*, and "The Signaller" by Keith Roberts (later included in the novel *Pavane*) or "The Gnarly Man" by L. Sprague De Camp. There are also some excellent newer stories by writers like Bruce Sterling, Jane Yolen, Michael Swanwick, Judith Tarr, Ursula K. Le Guin and John Crowley (are there any writers "like" John Crowley?), and "God's Hooks" an amazing piece of apocalyptic by Howard Waldrop in which Izaak Walton goes fishing and meets John Bunyan.

I've not read that much fantasy recently, having turned more towards "hard" sf. So much fantasy depends on nostalgia for its effect, and nostalgia is more characteristic of children and teenagers than the middle-aged. Approaching my 40th birthday my thoughts turn more to hope then memory. And also my threshold of boredom is a lot lower, and I want things to happen in stories. I would have loved this book immensely when I was 15. But I'm glad I've got it now.

The Silence of the Langford is published at $15 by NESFA Press (New England Science Fiction Association, PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA) to demonstrate to other people why Dave Langford keeps on winning Hugo awards for fan writing. It contains literally dozens of pieces, all by Langford: talks given at conventions, fan writing, short stories, reviews and criticism, and 12 columns first published in *Million*, the late sister magazine to *Interzone*. Almost all of it is funny; almost all of it is interesting; some of it is true. Much of it may be all three at once. You already know that because you read Dave's "Ansible Link" column which appears every month in *IZ*. (One of the older pieces in the book is a short obituary to mark the original *Ansible*'s supposed final issue in 1987.)

I had a complicated time getting this precious volume out of Brighton – I seem to remember Andy Robertson locking himself into a toilet with the book for 45 minutes, only coming out when I threatened Belloctomy on his bookshelves. And even then I had to re-read most of a Greg Benford novel before he would deliver up the Langford volume. But it was worth it. I would be telling a lie if I said this book was "unputdownable." I had to put it down when I got to the bottom of page three because I was laughing so much I was unable to turn to page four.

Ken Brown





Lovecraft's Life

Andy Robertson

S. T. Joshi's ***H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*** (Necronomicon Press, $20) is a landmark in Lovecraftian scholarship and probably represents its author's magnum opus. At over 700 pages, it is everything such a biography should be: minutely detailed, devoted but not uncritical, and somehow able to explain its weird protagonist's weirder life ("his own most fantastic creation") without too often descending to the level of the laundry list. It is splendidly successful in showing why so many of his contemporaries found him so fascinating, and why so many people still do find him so fascinating, even long after his death. If the purpose of good biography is to make you the *friend* of its subject this is a very good biography indeed.

Lovecraft the horror writer is well known. Less well known is Lovecraft the proto-sf fan, a giant of the nascent weird/sf fiction community in the 1920s and 30s; Lovecraft the leading spirit of the Amateur Print Associations (lineal ancestors, along one line, of the degenerate "fanzines" of today, though not then primarily directed towards sf); Lovecraft the epistolarian – the writer of an estimated 50,000 letters, a fascinating few thousands of which have been published; and above all Lovecraft the friend, the associate of so very many talented and intelligent people. A significant fraction of these were or went on to become distinctive presences in sf and fantasy, and of these the best remembered are probably Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, C. L. Moore, Henry Kuttner, Virgil Finlay, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith and Donald Wandrei. There are also a smaller number of people who later became significant in sf but whose contact with Lovecraft was slight because he died so soon – such as Donald A. Wollheim and (an astonishing surprise to me) James Blish.

The book is certainly not without faults, but I think they are unavoidable faults, because I find it difficult even to review it without duplicating them. It almost defiantly assumes that everyone is interested in Lovecraft and reasonably knowledgable about Lovecraft, and there is no apology and no compromise afforded to the ordinary sf or horror reader, let alone the mainstream reviewer or literary critic. Perhaps this is the best attitude to take, and certainly it is the bravest, but I am still not quite sure that the book should be so rigorously chronological. Even a biography subtitled "A Life" should perhaps treat its subject hierarchically, and start by mentioning the most important things instead of plunging straight into the earliest. Lovecraft's early years were spent in a Bedlamite seclusion, frequently ill, socially isolated. Contact with what was then called Amateurdom (an informal network of writers which, I repeat, had nothing especially to do with sf or fantasy) freed him to enjoy society through reading and writing, but much of his earlier work is utterly forgettable, and the first quarter of this book contains a lot that could have been abbreviated or totally omitted.

But this criticism can not apply to the bulk of the biography. Once Joshi's subject matter improves and the information available becomes more plentiful the book's almost month-by-month analysis of Lovecraft's life, letters, fiction, philosophy and friends becomes absorbing and ultimately quite fascinating. Lovecraft started as an occasional essayist and an awfully bad poet, but he matured swiftly: his earliest stories were written for amateur publication, and were not professionally submitted for nearly six years, but their eventual acceptance started his long association with the magazine *Weird Tales* and triggered the creation of what is probably the most significant and influential body of weird fiction in existence. This biography is not, of course, an analysis of that fiction, but Lovecraft's stories are more than adequately treated, and the chronological survey of his life makes the various phases of his work and their interrelation with his philosophy and politics clear. I think Joshi earns the right to nail down for posterity the really good'uns, though of course I disagree with his judgement here and there. (For instance, is it possible that anyone can read "The Dunwich Horror" and not notice that it is a parody of the Incarnation, right down to *eloi, eloi?* Or am I just being stupid?)

But of course it is Lovecraft's life, not his fiction, which is the prime focus. The 18 years or so that encompass his brief marriage, almost all his major friendships, most of his published letters, and all his important stories, are covered in the latter three-quarters of the book, and *can* only be covered by the most rigorous compression of events. It is here that the book really comes alive. Page after page overflows with the evidence of a mind fully itself and fully alight — not just in fiction and essays, but in historical writings and antiquarianism, in accounts of literary conventions, visits to friends, philosophical arguments, reviews and feedback on other people's work (for nothing interested Lovecraft so much as talking about weird fiction, and he continually encouraged other people to write, write, write), travelogues, *jokes* (believe it or not, Lovecraft could be hysterically funny), complaints about the deadly boredom of the professional "revision" by which he made a meagre daily crust, amateur politics, and above all in *communication*, communication at every possible opportunity and by every possible medium, but primarily by letter. Lovecraft was anything but the eccentric recluse of his popular stereotype, and he packed more into his short real life than seems possible. Thumbnail biographical sketches of friends and acquaintances abound, for there were so many of these that only the most important can be treated in any detail: and nearly everyone mentioned seems to deserve a minor biography of their own. These people help fill the book with their own memories of Lovecraft, and with the echoes of their own lives and their own works.

Lovecraft's death was early and hard, and was probably a result of the atrocious poverty in which he lived. His literary career has been amazingly successful but almost entirely posthumous. Joshi treats this quite briefly, and in the same fashion gives an overview of serious critical opinion on Lovecraft (which remains almost universally negative, with some brave exceptions, like Angela Carter). Though I think these analyses good, I am not completely comfortable with their tone. I detect a desire to claim Lovecraft as a purely highbrow writer, and I prefer to think that his outrageous and continuing popularity is partly due to the pulp influence which, I admit, he hated and fought against. The contemporary idea of his work embodied in things like *Re-Animator* or the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG is inadequate, maybe, but it does contains odd elements of truth, and it is not entirely a bad thing. To put it another way: one hopes that the critics' judgment of Lovecraft will change, but one hopes even more for a revaluation of popular culture and of genre writings of all sorts. In this connection I wish that Joshi had said a little more about Lovecraft's enormous success on the continent, where the *bandes dessinée* tradition of popular graphic art enjoys just such a degree of critical recognition and study. Lovecraft's influence on such artists as Druillet, Moebius, Breccia and of course Giger has been enormous, and may account in part for his generally higher status there.

Also, I have to say that Joshi sometimes gives the impression of a nig-

gard lack of grace in his references to some of Lovecraft's peers. It may be reasonable to prefer Clark Ashton Smith's poetry to his fiction, but to dismiss that fiction as "a very acquired taste" invites the rejoinder that for the majority of people that is what Lovecraft's own work must ever remain. Robert E. Howard's writing is poles apart from Lovecraft's, but it has excellences, and even if they are excellences which a Lovecraftian scholar is not well equipped to appreciate a slightly more open mind would be welcome. But most serious and severe is Joshi's judgment of August Derleth and of Arkham House, (the publishing house he founded primarily to propagate Lovecraft's work, which is today, rightly, the most prestigious of all the small presses). That Derleth distorted some of Lovecraft's ideas while perpetrating a cartload of awful pastiche is old hat, but to imply, as Joshi does, that Derleth somehow "prevented Lovecraft's work from reaching a mainstream audience" by publishing in a minority press is a stupid piece of ingratitude, and this is the one part of the book I really do wish he had repented of.

Let it pass: enough ichor will be spilt over it without *Interzone* getting involved. Having discharged my mind on that one point, I had better sum up. This is a superb book, and it is so much better than the ordinary run of literary biographies that it will be impossible for the blindest reviewer to reject it as a genre curiosity or an amusing grotesque. The whole community of Lovecraftian scholarship speaks through it and through Joshi; its weight, its sheer intelligence, will make it impossible to dismiss, and I think it will mark the slow beginning of Lovecraft's acceptance as a genuine, though eccentric, literary figure, at least in America. Nothing would so much aid this now as the publication of a good selection of Lovecraft's letters in an accessible form, and perhaps we can hope that this will be Joshi's next task.

Andy Robertson

Reading for fun and profit

Paul Brazier

Some people, I do believe, read for pleasure – indeed, one of my fondest beliefs is that even these reviews give some modicum of pleasure, as well as providing information regarding how well or ill a given book should be received. But it would appear that the given wisdom is that the average age of those who read for pleasure is rising inexorably. If this is so, then I wonder why so many books are published for younger readers. I mean, I think I understand the reasoning behind the publication of ***Star Wars: The Galactic Empire – Ships of the Fleet*** and ***Star Wars: The Rebel Alliance – Ships of the Fleet*** by Bill Smith (Boxtree, £11.99 each). These pop-up layout-and-technical specifications books have no literary merit whatever, despite being fiction from beginning to end (and the worst sort of fiction – fantasy with no base in reality); but they provide something glossy, apparently expensive, and perhaps related to the interests of a small boy that doting grandparents or other misguided relatives might buy for Xmas. I do find it hard to believe that any small boy would want to save his own pocket money to buy these things, for all that they are triumphs of paper engineering, and must have been hand-glued, stitched and finished. So Boxtree are attempting to exploit the difference between the purchaser and the consumer here. (Incidentally, I have profited from seeing and reviewing these books: I would have craved – as a twelve-year old or now – any such book that illustrated and explored the extraordinary diversity of aeroplanes that existed between 1930 and 1950. But my chances of seeing any such aircraft would be much the same as my chances of seeing an Imperial Star Destroyer, so the fantasy is the same in kind, despite the fact that my area of interest is real aeroplanes, not imaginary spaceships. I crave them no longer.)

Real books, books with stories in, still appear in great quantity for young readers as well. Scholastic/Point seem to be doing very well, and Virgin have certainly done a superb job of marketing their Dr Who tie-in novels to a presumably adolescent audience. Since the Dr Who books first appeared, Virgin have regularly published: classic TV stories retold (too thin for me); so-called "missing" tales (which are presumably new stories that use previous Dr Who incarnations); and "The New Adventures of Doctor Who," a series of novels by new authors taking the doctor's adventures forward from the time the BBC finally stopped making the TV serials. This last is Virgin's real achievement, so much so that I understand that the BBC intend to end the licence agreement and to take over producing the books themselves.

What Virgin have achieved is simple: they have published monthly some 50-plus new stories of Dr Who, and they must have found a niche, or they would not have continued. More importantly, they have discovered several new writers of real talent who perhaps would never have got a breakthrough chance otherwise. Paul Cornell and Kate Orman are two of their best, and I was pleased to find both their names in the five books to hand here.

Broadly, in "The New Adventures," the Doctor is still characterized as Sylvester McCoy and Ace starts off by being his companion, but soon gets to share the chore with a newly-introduced character, Dr Bernice Summerfield (Benny). ***Happy Endings*** by Paul Cornell (Virgin, £4.99)



is actually the fiftieth book in the series, advertised and written as such, and features the wedding of Benny that leads to a giant nostalgic get-together of previous characters the like of which has probably not been seen since the convention at the end of Heinlein's *The Number of the Beast.* It is full of subtle nuances and little jokes – to give you the flavour, there is a character throughout called Pike, and quite separately Cornell evokes *Dad's Army* without mentioning it; then, 30 pages on, the Brigadier calls Pike "stupid boy". That's all, nothing spectacular, but a delight nonetheless, as Cornell does this kind of thing over and over. I'm sure I missed some, but I can catch them next time through. The end of the book flags somewhat, but I understand that most of the authors of the series wrote a paragraph each for the wedding-party chapter, so it was bound to be uneven. And of course the plot wavers a bit. But Cornell's sure hand takes over so we end the book feeling sad, uplifted, and eager to buy and read the next.



Godengine by Craig Hinton (Virgin, £4.99) is godawful. I didn't enjoy this at all. Set on Mars as the Daleks are invading Earth in 2157, we see the Martians trying to form an alliance with the Daleks while the Doctor treks across a cold and inhospitable Mars to attempt to thwart their plans. Meanwhile, someone is killing off the members of his party... This tosh is hugely sub-Alistair Maclean and has no redeeming humour, and not a very interesting story. And I was particularly annoyed that everyone kept wishing that

Benny was here so she could translate for the Martians. She wasn't, she didn't turn up, so why mention it? Sorry. Next.



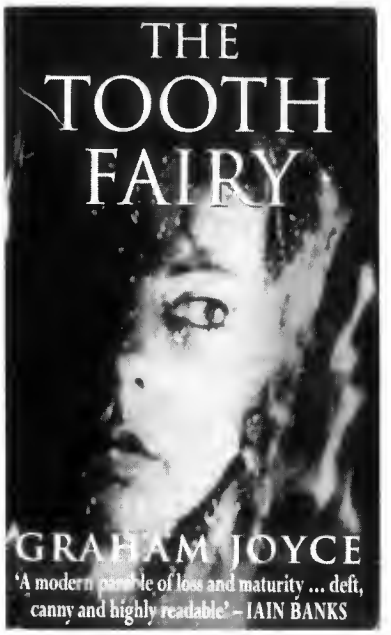
Christmas on a Rational Planet by Lawrence Miles (Virgin, £4.99) is every bit as good as the Paul Cornell, but very different. The Doctor turns up in Woodwicke on the east coast of the USA looking for his companion Ros Forrester (she replaced Benny somewhere in the earlier books I haven't read yet). Reading this book is a very strange experience because time passes more slowly in the book than in reality – it would take perhaps three or four hours to read the book, but only an hour passes. Ros is a black human Martian from the far future somehow displaced to this town of southern bigots and is trying to shoot Abraham Lincoln to get the doctor's attention. She knows he will turn up and put the time stream right again, and rescue her at the same time. But she has been displaced by the same alien influence that is taking over and subtly influencing all the civic leaders in the town. There's lots more and it's very exciting and very mysterious and I loved it. Next.



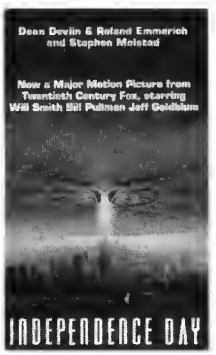
Return of the Living Dad by Kate Orman (Virgin, £4.99) is vintage Doctor Who, with the time and place of the setting whipping back and forth through time like there is (was?) no tomorrow, lots of little jokes, and, best of all, not much Doctor – it's always best when the companions get the adventures, because they don't know everything, and they might die – but it all ends up in a little village called Little Caldwell with lots of abducted aliens, and I have to admit that although I thoroughly enjoyed this book, I can't recall the plot at all. Which means I get to enjoy it when I read it again. Value for money. Next.



The Death of Art by Simon Bucher-Jones (Virgin, £4.99) – great titles, don't you think? – places the action in 19th-century Paris but with lots of mental time travel, aliens taking over the minds of the ruling class, and the solution of a fabric of time and space problem of another race of aliens that could have destroyed both their continuum and ours. More horror than science fiction, this is still an immensely enjoyable classic Dr Who romp.



But who reads these books for pleasure? I do certainly, but with the ultimate idea of reviewing them. Who buys them? Is it the young, the new readers? Or is it the older ones, my generation? I don't know, but I'm glad they do, because these are, on the whole, very good books indeed, and certainly excellent introductions into the pleasure and profit of reading. Three books now that I find myself reviewing here because I need illustrations of what I read for pleasure. First, I was very ill in July and August 1996, and needed something undemanding to read, and ***Independence Day*** by Dean Devlin & Roland Emmerich and Stephen Molstad (Boxtree, £4.99) was lying around, so I read it. And it was undemanding, and for what it was I thoroughly enjoyed it, but it is actually not very good, being a type of end-of-the-world book where characters are introduced who then die, or, even worse, survive and meet up by the most wildly improbable coincidence. I'm told that the best bits of the movie appeared in all the trailers. I don't know because I never felt well enough to go and see it – but if that is true, then the film was better than this book. But I couldn't have read anything more demanding, so I guess all books have their place.



Finally, two books that I wanted to read, but saved until I was well.

Anyone who remembers my reviews from these columns will recall that I said that Graham Joyce's *Requiem* was one of the best books I had read for a long time. I have to report that while ***The Tooth Fairy*** (Signet, £5.99) is not as good, it isn't far off. It starts out innocuously enough as what appears to be a kid's book, but gets progressively darker. Again it is about an unusual haunting, and again it has an extremely unusual solution to the problem. Graham's stories often feature violence, but very little and usually as the cause rather than the solution of problems. I like that particularly – the real solutions to problems need thought and kindness.

The other book is the second in Paul Kearney's *The Monarchies of God* series. In ***The Heretic Kings*** (Gollancz, £16.99) he continues to shadow the events of mediaeval Europe in his own fantastical version, and with his usual skill manages to make the novel into a complete story while continuing to tease out the strands of the longer story. I expressed in my review of the first book, *Hawkswood's Voyage,* my admiration for Kearney and my disappointment with his taking on this stereotypical fantasy project, but he chose to take that as a bad review – hence the acrimonious exchange of letters in this magazine. Well, in this book he seems to have taken his revenge. On page 30, he describes the burning of heretics (a recurring theme in this series) – "the dark stick figure at the heart of every tiny, discrete fire. Every one a heretic, yielding up his spirit in a saffron halo of unimaginable agony" – and only three sentences later, "Braziers burned everywhere." I take this in good part. (Incidentally, I am told my wife and I appear as cameos in John Whitbourn's next book – when oh when will it appear, Gollancz?) It takes a lot of skill to put that kind of subtle insult into a book. And I shall continue to read these books, because Kearney is a very good writer, and I shall continue to hope he returns to the modern-dress fantasy that he does so well some time in the future.

Paul Brazier



BOOKS RECEIVED



DECEMBER 1996

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anthony, Piers. **Balook.** Illustrated by Patrick Woodroffe. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00398-2, 232pp, A-format paperback, cover by Woodroffe, $S.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) January 1997.

Ashley, Allen. **The Planet Suite.** TTA Press [5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs. CB6 2LB], ISBN 0-9526947-1-9, 98pp, B-format paperback, cover by Dave Mooring, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a British writer known for his many short stories in the small press, it has a cover commendation from Brian Aldiss: "Any novel that sails through the rough seas between mainstream and genre is to be welcomed – this is the course for the future!") December (?) 1996.

Ashpole, Edward. **Where is Everybody?: The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence.** Second edition. Sigma Press [1 South Oak Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 6AR], ISBN 1-8S058-S76-8, vi+216pp, B-format paperback, £6.9S. (Illustrated popular science text; the first edition appeared in 1989; the author states in his preface that the book is heavily rewritten in the light of new evidence and theories.) Late entry: 28th October publication, received in December 1996.

Ballard, J. G. **Running Wild.** Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-654819-9, 106pp, B-format paperback, £4.99. (Marginally sf novella, first published in 1988; this was previously paperbacked by Arrow/Arena in 1989, but unaccountably they let it lapse out of print, so now HarperCollins/Flamingo have taken it up – it has some thematic similarity to the new Ballard novel they published recently, Cocaine Nights; according to Kathryn Cramer, whose opinions from The New York Review of SF are quoted on the back cover, Running Wild, despite its slimness, is "simultaneously a detective novel, a psychological horror novel and a dystopian political novel," and it "may well be remembered as one of the major political novels of our time.") 6th January 1997.

Ballard, J. G. **A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews.** Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-6S4821-0, 304pp, B-format paperback, cover by Stuart Haygarth, £6.99. (Non-fiction collection by a major sf writer, first published in 1996; it gathers pieces, mainly short, written for magazines and newspapers between 1962 and 199S, and is divided into sections headed "Film," "Lives," "The Visual World," "Writers," "Science," "Autobiography," "Science Fiction" and "In General"; there is a detailed index; on cover and flyleaf of this edition various reviews are quoted which compare the author with Oscar Wilde, H. G. Wells and George Orwell, among others.) 6th January 1997.

Barrett, David V. **Sects, 'Cults' and Alternative Religions: A World Survey and Sourcebook.** Blandford, ISBN 0-7137-2S67-2, 320pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Weston, £17.99. (Guide to alternative religions, some of them of science-fictional interest or origin [e.g. the Aetherius Society and Scientology]; first edition; illustrated with 16 pages of photographs, this is a well-informed and scrupulously fair-minded book, quite a contrast to the piece of coffee-table sensationalism we listed in our last issue [Cults: Prophecies, Practices & Personalities by Michael Jordan]; Barrett is of course well known within the sf world as a short-story writer, editor of the anthology Digital Dreams [1990] and contributor of reviews and interviews to Interzone and elsewhere; he has written or edited various non-fiction works, but this is his magnum opus to date; recommended.) 16th December 1996.

Boast, Philip. **Resurrection.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1724-6, 378pp, hardcover, cover by Lee Gibbons, £16.99. (Historical fantasy [?] novel, first edition; this is a sort of "through the ages" saga, from 13,000 B.C. to the present, centring on London's "holiest place" – where St Paul's Cathedral presently stands; the author, born 1952, has previously written several mainstream novels with London settings as well as Watersmeet, a "West Country saga," and Pride, "an epic novel set in Australia and England.") 23rd January 1997.

Brockman, Robin. **The Message.** Blitz Editions, ISBN 1-856-05362-8, 314pp, B-format paperback, no price shown. (Sf novel, first edition; possibly a debut book, it appears to be a UFO novel; the author is an American playwright living in London.) No date shown: December (?) 1996.

Chester, Deborah. **Shadow War.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00400-8, 390pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mary Jo Phalen, $6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the second volume in a trilogy which began with Reign of Shadows.) January 1997.

Clarke, Arthur C. **3001: The Final Odyssey.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-34S-31522-7, viii+263pp, hardcover, $25. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the concluding novel in the "2001" saga, this will no doubt receive a good deal of attention; like all Clarke's latter-day solo novels, it's slim [the last 25 pages consist of "Sources and Acknowledgments" and "Valediction"] but it looks to be exciting stuff.) 12th March 1997.

Donnelly, Joe. **Incubus.** Signet, ISBN 0-451-18638-9, 442pp, A-format paperback, £S.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in 1996.) 30th January 1997.

Feintuch, David. **Prisoner's Hope.** "The Third Voyage in the Seafort Saga." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-439-1, 506pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Youll, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 199S; the author is a recent winner of the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer.) 16th January 1997.

Forward, Robert L. **Saturn Rukh.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85417-2, 317pp, hardcover, $22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; in an accompanying letter, David G. Hartwell states: "When it comes to hardcore science fiction full of neat gadgets and big ideas, no one today beats Robert L. Forward.") March 1997.

Foster, Alan Dean. **Jed the Dead.** "Unearthly. Unidentified. Unbelievable. Unembalmed." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00399-0, 298pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gary Ruddell, $5.99. (Sf novel, first edition.) January 1997.

Foster, Alan Dean. **Life Form.** Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-S104-7, 311pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this appears to be the first world hardcover edition.) 23rd January 1997.

Foster, Alan Dean. **Mid-Flinx.** Orbit, ISBN 1-8S723-398-0, 346pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 199S; latest in the "Flinx



of the Commonwealth" series of adventures.) 16th January 1997.

Furey, Maggie. **Harp of Winds: Book Two of the Artefacts of Power.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-918922-4, 40Spp, hardcover, cover by Mick Van Houten, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1994; this appears to be the first hardcover edition.) 2nd January 1997.

Grimwood, Jon Courtenay. **neoAddix.** "The cyber noir ultrashocker." New English Library, ISBN 0-340-67472-5, 3S9pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; this is a debut work by a new British writer who has previously written sundry non-fiction.) February 1997.

James, Peter. **Alchemist.** Signet, ISBN 0-45-117997-8, S73pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1996.) 20th December 1996.

Koontz, Dean. **Sole Survivor.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1756-4, 448pp [typescript], hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition [?]; what we have received here is not a proof, but a bound photocopied typescript; oddly, the publishers have neglected to put the novel's title anywhere on the book [there is no title page], but an accompanying flier tells us that it will be called Sole Survivor.) 9th January 1997.

Laymon, Richard. **Fiends.** Introduction by Dean Koontz. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1820-X, x+27Spp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Horror collection, first edition [?]; it contains the title story, which is an original short novel of about 100 pages, plus a dozen reprinted short stories from the 1970s to the 1990s.) 30th January 1997.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Freedom's Choice.** "The second of the brilliant new Catteni sequence." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03773-1, 304pp, hardcover, cover by Peter Elson, £15.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?].) 23rd January 1997.

McConnell, Ashley. **The Courts of Sorcery.** "The explosive conclusion to the Demon Wars trilogy!" Ace, ISBN 0-441-00393-1, 21Spp, A-format paperback, cover by Duane O. Myers, $S.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) January 1997.

Manlove, Colin. **An Anthology of Scottish Fantasy Literature.** Polygon [22 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LF], ISBN 0-7486-6213-8, 272pp, C-format paperback, cover by Phoebe Traquair, £10.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains prose and poetry by Scottish writers, ranging from anonymous medieval balladeers through Robert Burns and James Hogg to George MacDonald, Naomi Mitchison, Alasdair Gray, Iain Banks, Margaret Elphinstone and many others; many of the pieces are extracts from longer works; a useful, solid and scholarly book.) 2nd December 1996.

Moorcock, Michael. **Fabulous Harbours.** Avon, ISBN 0-380-97475-4, 228pp, hardcover, cover by Bill Binger, $24. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the UK, 199S; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in Interzone 102.) 10th January 1997.

Palmer, Warren James. **Third Player: Book Three of The Dyason.** Ripping Publishing [PO Box 286, Epsom, Surrey KT19 9YG], ISBN 1-899884-08-4, ix+406pp, A-format paperback, £S.99. (Sf novel, first edition; we said of volume two: "here we have that rare phenomenon – a second book in a self-published series [most never seem to get beyond volume one]"; so now we have the even rarer phenomenon of a third book in a self-published series; slam-bang space-opera adventure stuff, as before it's a professional-looking mass-market paperback; the author-publisher states that he will be reissuing E. E. "Doc" Smith's "Lensman" series of sf novels in UK paperbacks, "available from Sping [sic] 1997.") Late entry: November publication, received in December 1996.

Powers, Tim. **The Anubis Gates.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00401-6, 387pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jean-Francois Podevin, $12. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983; winner of the Philip K. Dick Award.) January 1997.

Pringle, David, ed. **The Best of Interzone.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648243-0, xvii+S18pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; this is the first Interzone anthology in six years [five other, much slimmer, volumes appeared from various publishers between 1985 and 1991]; it contains 29 previously uncollected stories from the 1990s; an American hardcover edition is due from St Martin's Press in May 1997; the contributors are Brian Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, Stephen Baxter, Chris Beckett, Eric Brown, Molly Brown, Eugene Byrne, Richard Calder, Paul Di Filippo, Thomas M. Disch, Greg Egan, Timons Esaias, David Garnett, Mary Gentle, Nicola Griffith, Ben Jeapes, Graham Joyce & Peter F. Hamilton, Garry Kilworth, David Langford, Ian Lee, Ian R. MacLeod, Sean McMullen, John Meaney, Kim Newman, Paul Park, Geoff Ryman, Brian Stableford, Ian Watson and Cherry Wilder; excellent stuff!) 6th January 1997.

Rohan, Michael Scott. **Maxie's Demon.** Orbit, ISBN 1-8S723-462-6, 376pp, A-format paperback, £S.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it features the famous Dr John Dee as a character, and it seems to be related, tangentially at least, to Rohan's earlier "Spiral" trilogy – Chase the Morning, The Gates of Noon and Cloud Castles.) 3rd April 1997.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays.** Edited by Christopher Tolkien. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10263-X, 240pp, B-format paperback, £9.99. (Essay and lecture collection by the great fantasy writer, first published in 1983; it contains seven scholarly pieces, including the famous and oft-reprinted "On Fairy-Stories" [1939].) 6th January 1997.

Vance, Jack. **Night Lamp.** "A novel of the Gaean Reach." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-2246S3-8, 380pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; reviewed, enthusiastically, by Chris Gilmore in Interzone 114.) 6th January 1997.

Weber, David. **Honor Among Enemies: An Honor Harrington Adventure.** Bantam, ISBN 0-SS3-50492-4, S43pp, A-format paperback, cover by Buggy G. Riphead, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this is probably the first book by Weber to be published in Britain, although he has written at least four earlier sf novels; like the David Feintuch novels [see above] it's touted as "Hornblower in space"; what's with all this Horatio Hornblower business all of a sudden? – an imaginary Napoleonic Wars naval hero who flourished in book form between the 1930s and the 1960s, there hasn't been a film about him since 19S1 [when Gregory Peck was miscast in the part], so why do publishers expect young people of today even to have heard of him? – is there a C. S. Forester/ Hornblower renaissance going on that we haven't noticed until now?) 9th January 1997.

Wells, Alan. **The Chronicles of Betsy.** Avon Books [1 Dovedale Studios, 465 Battersea Park Rd., London SW11 4LR], ISBN 1-86033-781-3, 74pp, small-press paperback, £5.95. (Sf novella, first edition; apparently a debut book by a new British writer, born 1964.) No date shown: received in December 1996.

Werber, Bernard. **Empire of the Ants.** Translated by Margaret Rocques. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14112-7, 349pp, A-format paperback, £S.99. (Sf novel,

first published in France as Les Fourmis, 1991; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in Interzone 110.) 9th January 1997.

Williams, Tad. **Otherland, Volume One: City of Golden Shadow.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-968301-6, xiii+770pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Whelan, £16.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1996; it's not clear which is the book's title and which is the series title, "Otherland" [which appears alone on the cover] or "City of Golden Shadow"; four novels are promised, and, knowing Tad Williams's proclivities, they'll probably all be at least as massive as this one.) 19th December 1996.

Womack, Jack. **Let's Put the Future Behind Us.** Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-225562-6, 310pp, C-format paperback, £8.99. (Sf [?] novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this one is being presented as a mainstream satire on contemporary Russia, a sort of Dead Souls for the millennium.) 23rd January 1997.

Spinoffery

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and share-crops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.

Anderson, Kevin J., and Rebecca Moesta. **Shards of Alderaan.** "Star Wars: Young Jedi Knights." Boulevard, ISBN 1-57297-207-6, 216pp, A-format paperback, $5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first edition.) January 1997.

Kidd, Paul. **Terry Pratchett's Discworld II: Missing Presumed...!? The Official Strategy Guide.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-2204-X, 143pp, large-format paperback, cover by Josh Kirby, £14.99. (Humorous fantasy computer-game book, spun off from Pratchett's novels; first edition; it contains a full-colour fold-out map.) Late entry: 22nd November publication, received in December 1996.

Kube-McDowell, Michael P. **Tyrant's Test: The Black Fleet Crisis, Book Three.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50480-0, 366pp, A-format paperback, cover by Drew Struzan, £4.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 9th January 1997.

Mitchell, Paul. **The Duchovny Files: The Truth is In Here.** "The unauthorized biography." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50591-2, 284pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Illustrated biography-cum-scrapbook about David Duchovny, the actor who plays FBI Agent Mulder in the sf/horror TV series The X-Files, created by Chris Carter; first published in the USA, 1996.) 12th December 1996.

Oltion, Jerry. **Mudd in Your Eye.** "Star Trek, #81." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-00260-0, 280pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) January 1997.

Stork, David G., ed. **HAL's Legacy: 2001's Computer as Dream and Reality.** Foreword by Arthur C. Clarke. MIT Press, ISBN 0-262-19378-7, xxi+384pp, hardcover, £16.95. (Illustrated anthology of papers on computers and artificial intelligence, referring throughout to the film and novel 2001: A Space Odyssey by Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick; first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a British added: it's a hefty and well-designed volume.) 12th January 1997.

Weldon, Michael J. **The Psychotronic Video Guide.** "The Bible of B movies is back!" Titan, ISBN 1-85286-770-1, x+646pp, very large-format paperback, £19.99. (Illustrated A-Z guide to over 3,000 horror, sf, fantasy and "exploitation" movies; first published in the USA, 1996; this is a follow-up to the author's earlier The Psychotronic Encyclopaedia of Film, which we never saw; there are glowing cover commendations from people like Quentin Tarantino; a useful reference book.) 31st January 1997.

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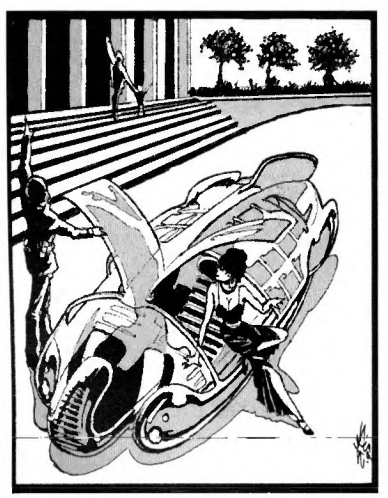
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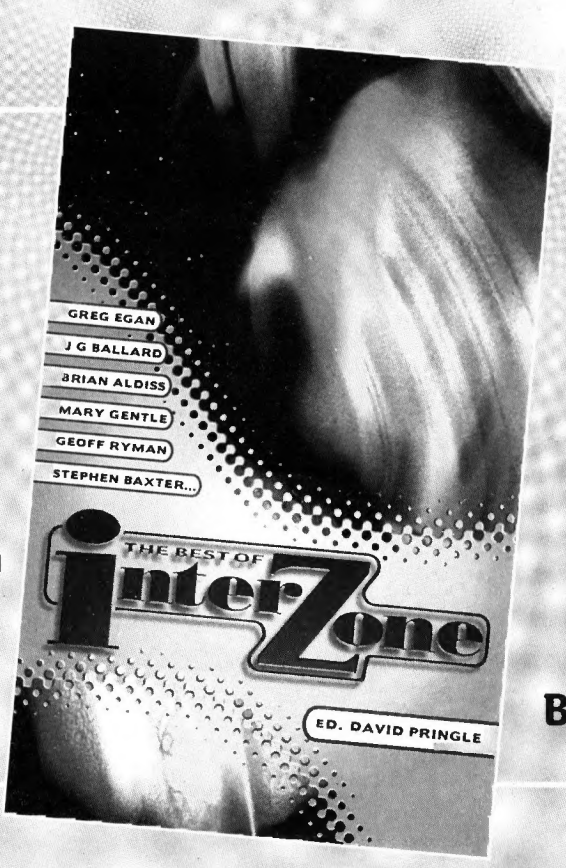


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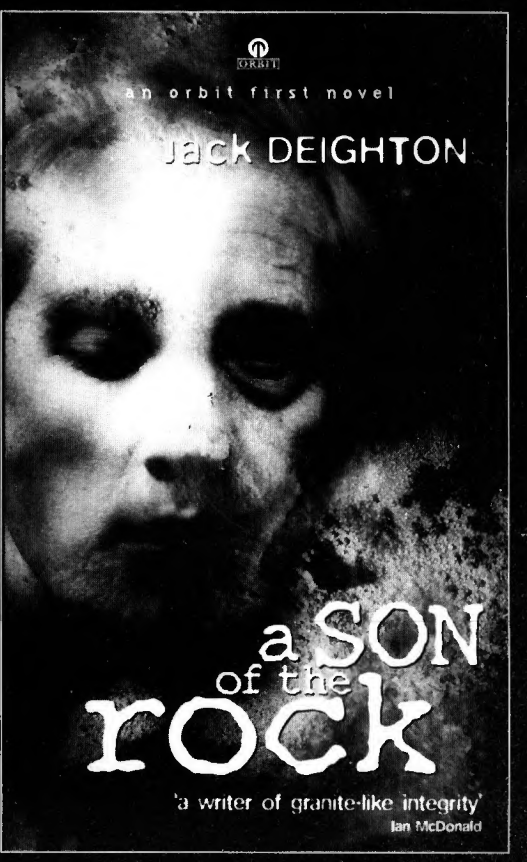
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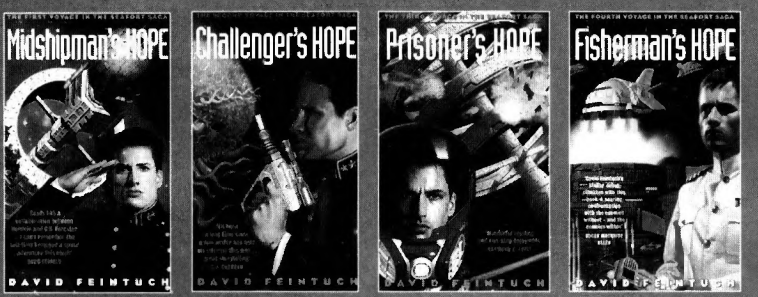


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